

PC GAMER[®]

**30 PAGES OF
REVIEWS**

**AGE OF WONDERS:
PLANETFALL**
**FINAL FANTASY XIV:
SHADOWBRINGERS**
**WOLFENSTEIN:
YOUNGBLOOD
& MORE!**

HANDS ON

**THE OUTER
WORLDS**

IS OBSIDIAN'S RPG
A FALLOUT
KILLER?

EXCLUSIVE

HUMAN KIND

THE CREATOR OF ENDLESS LEGEND
TAKES AIM AT CIVILIZATION'S CROWN

HARDWARE

**GAMING
LAPTOPS**

*ENJOY 144HZ
ON THE GO*

FUTURE

ISSUE 335



**DEUS EX
REVISITED**
THE MAKING OF
LIBERTY ISLAND



**INDIE
SPIRITS**
FIVE STORIES FROM
JAPAN'S PC SCENE



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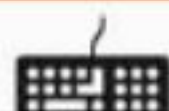
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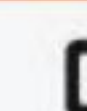
Windows 10 Home

Intel® Core™ i7-9750H Processor

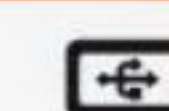
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“A WILDLY AMBITIOUS HISTORICAL STRATEGY GAME”



Amplitude's previous forays into the 4X genre have been beautiful, intricate games full of weird and interesting factions. The experience gained making *Endless Space* and *Endless Legend* has led Amplitude directly to *Humankind* – a wildly ambitious historical strategy game that hopes to steal *Civilization*'s thunder.

PHIL SAVAGE

Specialist in
Promotions

Twitter
@Octaeder

This month
Is leaving you all in good hands. (But also not actually leaving.)

On a personal note, this is my last issue as editor of the magazine. I'll still be around – overseeing the UK PCG team across both mag and website – but as of next month there'll be a new face getting photoshopped onto our cover. I'm excited to see what's next for the mag. Thanks for reading!

Phil Savage

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The PC Gamer team



ANDY KELLY
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This month
Talked to Harvey Smith about the making of *Deus Ex*'s most iconic level: Liberty Island.



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This month
Marked her final issue as acting dep ed by writing about lovable grumps and space camping.



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This month
Visited Amplitude to learn about their audacious plan to make the next great historical 4X.



SAMUEL ROBERTS
Specialist in
Moving on

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@SamuelWRoberts

This month
Left PC Gamer. Claims he will now play *Destiny 2* with Tom and Phil. We remain unconvinced.

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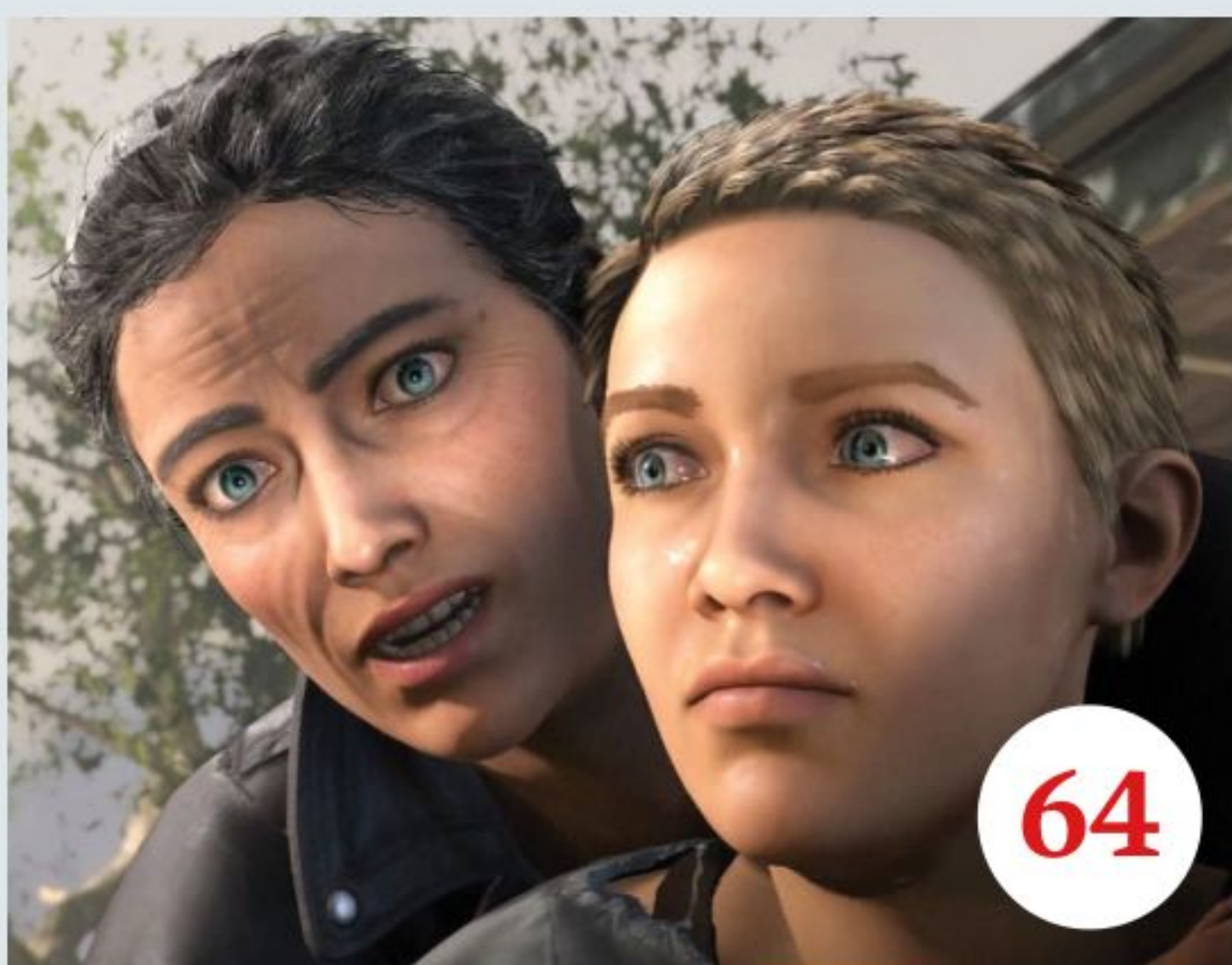
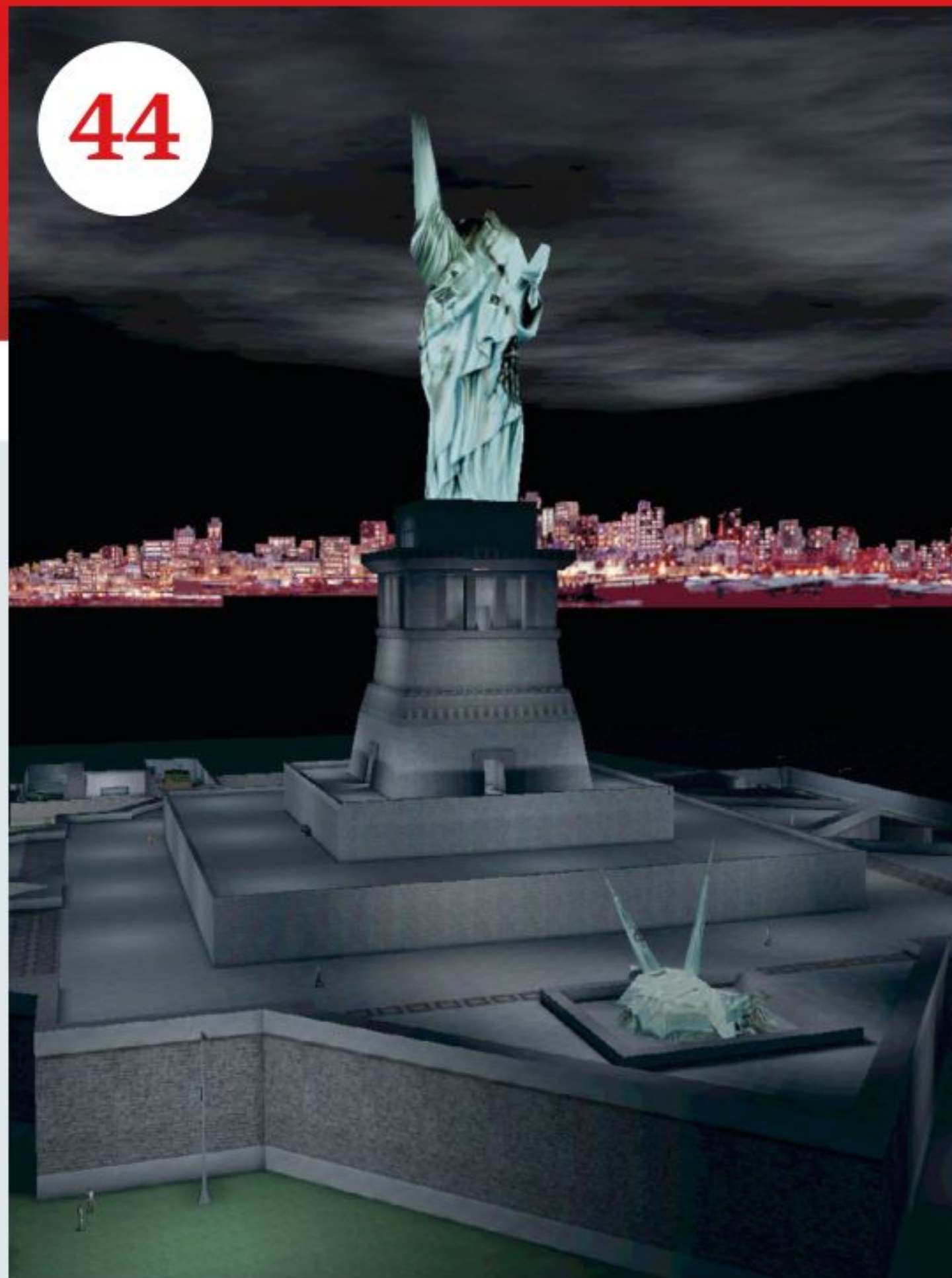
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Fortnite Season X has an '80s-inspired, neon-tinged look.

FORTNITE WORLD CUP

Three million quid for playing **FORTNITE**? Nice work if you can get it.

While *Fortnite*, Epic's world-conquering battle royale game, has yet to establish itself as a top-tier esports, that didn't stop 2.3 million people tuning into the recent *Fortnite* World Cup across YouTube and Twitch. A whopping \$30 million in prize money was up for grabs at the lavish tournament, which was held in New York City's Arthur Ashe Stadium on July 26-28.

The biggest winner of the tournament was 16-year-old Kyle 'Bugha' Giersdorf, who won the solo

tournament on the final day and pocketed \$3 million. That's a lot of cheese for being good at a computer game, but indicative of how popular Epic's brightly coloured shooter has become. Bugha's victory made headlines around the world, and not just in the gaming press.

**THE BIGGEST WINNER
OF THE TOURNAMENT
WAS KYLE 'BUGHA'
GIERSDORF**

Other winners included the UK's own Jaden 'Wolfiez' Ashman who, along with Dutch partner Dave 'Rojo' Jong, came second in the Duo finals, winning \$2.25 million between them. Ashman's mother told the BBC that she and her son would often row about his gaming habits, but that she now accepts his career choice as a professional esports player. A few million quid will do that.

Epic revealed that more than 40 million *Fortnite* players had participated in the qualifying events for the World Cup across six regions: North America East, North America West, Europe, Brazil, Asia, and Oceania. Players who made it to the

CRIME WAVE

YAKUZA



On August 29, Sega's Ryu Ga Gatoku Studio will officially unveil the next game in the *Yakuza* series.

This is, of course, relevant to my interests. But hold up Sega, don't forget that there are a lot of *Yakuza* games still yet to come to PC, including the wonderfully bizarre *Yakuza 5*. ■ **PS**

EPIC FLAIL

OOBLETS



Glumberland announced its farming and life sim *Ooblets* as an Epic Games Store exclusive. Following a blog post citing the reasons for the decision, people pretended to be disappointed backers (there's a Patreon for additional features), or sent death threats. Meanwhile, I'm waiting for my *Ooblets* tee in the post. ■ **MH**



SLIME CITY

GHOSTBUSTERS RM



Back in 2009, the original *Ghostbusters* reunited for a game that I think was pretty good. So I was delighted to hear that it's being re-released in October, because now I can play it on my PC. If you missed out on the boringly titled *Ghostbusters: The Video Game* the first time, it's worth a look. ■ **AK**



ABOVE, TOP: Nyhrox and Aqua winning the \$3 million duos grand prize.

ABOVE, BOTTOM: The World Cup was as lavish as some major sports tournaments.

tournament include Noah 'Vivid' Wright and Turner 'Tfue' Tenney, although *Fortnite* superstar Tyler 'Ninja' Blevins failed to qualify.

Elsewhere in the world of *Fortnite*, the much anticipated Season X update has added a bunch of new stuff to the game. Best of all is the B.R.U.T.E., a two-person mech suit (one player controls its movement and the other fires its guns). It can dash and stomp, and its arsenal includes a rocket barrage, an auto-shotgun, and a last resort self-destruct function.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Another new feature, Rift Zones, sees old map locations returning, and Epic has promised that more will appear as the season progresses. Missions have repackaged the usual battle pass challenges into themed bundles that reward battle pass points, cosmetics, and XP.

Fortnite clearly has staying power. Wherever I go in the world I see kids wearing *Fortnite* t-shirts and doing emotes IRL, so it's safe to say Epic won't be losing interest in the game any time soon. And with those viewing figures – it was reportedly the most-watched esports event in history outside of China – it's safe to assume that the *Fortnite* World Cup will return next year.

Andy Kelly, James Davenport

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Street Fighter V

Edmond 'E. Honda' Honda, has finally come to *Street Fighter V*.

Black Mesa

After years in development and many, many delays, the Xen chapters of *Half-Life* remake *Black Mesa* are finally out.

World of Warcraft

Good news for Worgen and Goblin players – Blizzard is updating the character models for both races.

Epic Games Store

We don't mind the Epic Games Store, but it needs an update. First step: being able to sort your games.

GTA Online

With games under scrutiny over gambling mechanics, putting a casino in Los Santos is tone deaf.

Call of Duty

Modern Warfare can't decide if war is Hell or just cool as Hell. You'd think they'd have figured it out by now.

LOWS



The Spy

[] BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy doesn't fear change, because The Spy doesn't exist in a linear narrative governed by the relationship between cause and effect. This is a perk of the job. It is useful for The Spy to be metaphysically malleable, at least when The Spy is being a spy – which isn't always the case, for the reasons explained above. To wallow in nostalgia, go to A. To read a debunked videogame rumour, go to B.

A. The Spy arrived in the industry when information moved slowly. Games had to be printed, packaged and posted. They would "go gold", a now meaningless term you will only ever see when a weary newshound has run out of interesting things to write about and reaches for a desperation press release. Because everything took months to happen, rumours had value and purpose. They would not be leaked. They would not be so easily debunked. They would not be fabricated to prop up SEO hungry websites. To read a debunked videogame rumour, go to B. For an anecdote, go to C.

B. A Reddit user claimed a Red Dead Redemption remake was in existence, citing a "friend" who worked at Rockstar. They later admitted this was an "experiment I have always wanted to do regarding the spreading of rumours in video game culture". Which

is an elaborate way of saying it was a lie. To continue, go to C. If you feel tired, go to sleep.

C. After the UK team took over the creation of the US magazine, The Spy briefly ran in both editions. But after numerous emails and even a subscriber survey, it became clear that the US market didn't understand The Spy. The page was removed, and presumably US readers are much happier as a result. The flipside to this is the presumption that the UK market does understand The Spy. Do you understand The Spy? Does The Spy? It doesn't really matter. To understand the purpose of The Spy, go to E. To read something else, turn over to the next page.

D. The Spy never asked you to come here, but The Spy respects your sense of self determination. Don't go anywhere, The Spy will be right back.

E. You might argue that The Spy doesn't belong in a nationally distributed magazine about videogames. The Spy would ask what – in the year 2019 – does? You are here. You have bought into PC Gamer magazine's stated aim of being something worth owning and spending time with. Maybe it's your first issue. Maybe you've been coming back for years. The Spy is a leftover from when the industry was arranged in such a way that having a page of rumours made sense. Also it was the '90s, and creating mascots was a thing that magazines did. Now the industry is different. The Spy is different. The Spy is a relic from the past trying to connect with the present. If you get comfort from that connection – that link to the past – The Spy has served a purpose. If you don't, that's OK too. For a conclusion, go to F. For a punchline, go to F.

F. If The Spy existed in a linear narrative, The Spy would recognise that this page had an air of finality to it. But The Spy isn't anything except what The Spy needs to be at that moment in time. Next month, The Spy will be different. Next month, The Spy will be the same. Next month, The Spy won't have to reach for a high-concept

way to cover for the fact that all of the Gamescom rumours will be out of date by the time this issue hits the shelves. That was the punchline. The Spy doesn't fear change. Spy out. ■

The Spy

THE SPY ARRIVED IN THE INDUSTRY WHEN INFORMATION MOVED SLOWLY



THE SPY
The Spy doesn't have a midlife in which to have a crisis in.

This month in... 2009



1 Please enjoy this 2019 prediction found within Jim Rossignol's feature on the future of PC gaming, "Valve release an FPS in which speech recognition and synthesis let you talk directly to characters." It's a prediction that's been proven wrong with just its first four words. Nevertheless, there's lots of interesting speculation, and it's worth it for that gorgeous opening spread.

ISSUE
205, October 2009
ON THE COVER
Napoleon: Total War
IN CINEMAS
The Final Destination

2 PC Gamer is definitely the only gaming mag still in print that would happily put a digital Napoleon on the cover. Thanks, *Total War*.



3 What a great feature section this issue had! Supporting Jim's futurism, here's Craig Pearson spending 24 hours searching for weird and wild Gmod servers to write about. From amazing builds to roleplaying to "Bouncy Fun", it's a great tribute to the spirit of PC Gaming. Fun fact: Craig would go on to work for Facepunch, so his research clearly left an impression.



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

Fed up of juggling launchers? GOG Galaxy could help.



STORE WARS

Can **GOG GALAXY 2.0** unify PC gaming's messy collection of clients?

Though Steam is still the dominant retail force in PC gaming, the scene is starting to fragment. EA has Origin, Ubisoft has Uplay, Microsoft has an arcane catacomb of systems that loosely resembles a storefront, and with the arrival of the Epic Games Store we're opening more launchers than ever. At PC Gamer our taskbars are busy with quick-launch icons for different clients, and it's enough to make us keen for the PC gaming equivalent of a universal remote – one client to rule them all. This is the problem that GOG have set out to solve with GOG Galaxy 2.0.

"We took a look at a couple of popular titles," says designer Piotr Karwowski. "*Fortnite*, *PUBG*, *Apex Legends*, *Overwatch*, *Rainbow Six: Siege*, *Destiny*, *Sea of Thieves*, *League of Legends*, *Dota*, *World of Tanks*. We picked the ones that we believe are big, popular, there's no scientific method behind this. We checked if you need a launcher to play those – and by the way this is not the most evil example you can find, actually we realised that for just those ten games you need eight different clients.

"I'm pretty sure that there are games where you need two different clients, because you buy a game on a platform and the platform opens the client." GOG Galaxy 2.0 has been in development for two years, and hopes to

serve as a master client that lets you quickly launch any game on your PC irrespective of the platform the game is tethered to. I watch as Karwowski signs into Battle.Net using Galaxy 2.0.

With the aid of his Blizzard Authenticator, the integration verifies in seconds and the Galaxy 2.0 library populates with Karwowski's Blizzard games. It's impressive, and if you buy new games in Battle.net, they appear automatically in your Galaxy 2.0 library too. The platform is syncing with all of your clients whenever you log in.

"This app should be really fast," says Karwowski. "Using this app when it comes to browsing, launching, should be the fastest experience you will get across all the apps because why else would you use it? We think it should be the best experience you can get when it comes to managing your library."

UNIFIED FRONT

Removing client permissions from Galaxy 2.0 is just as easy. The client immediately stops syncing. "There's one more thing which we did which I think should be a standard when it comes to any apps or platforms that amass user data.

"If you disconnect from GOG Galaxy all of your data you've imported into Galaxy will be removed



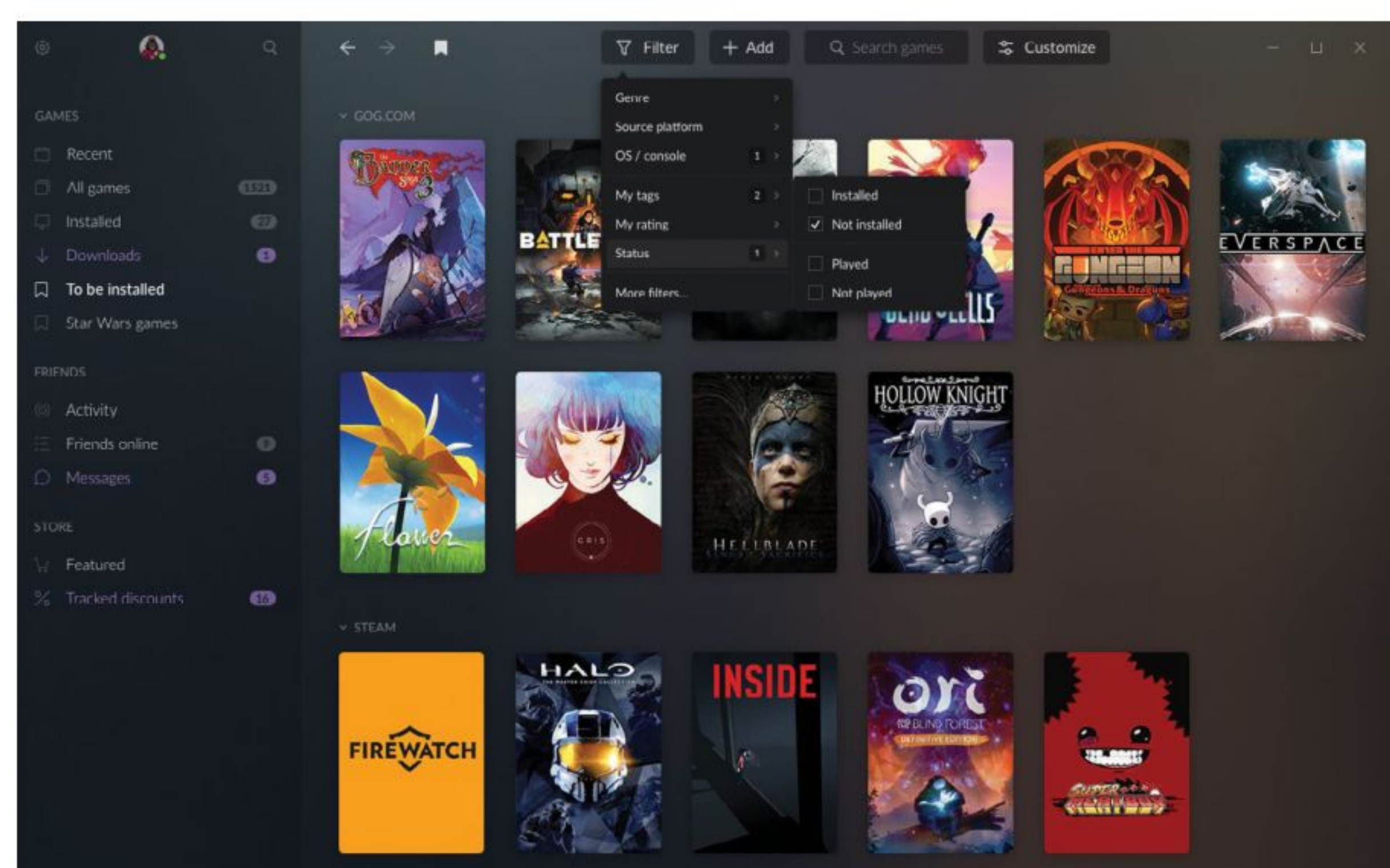
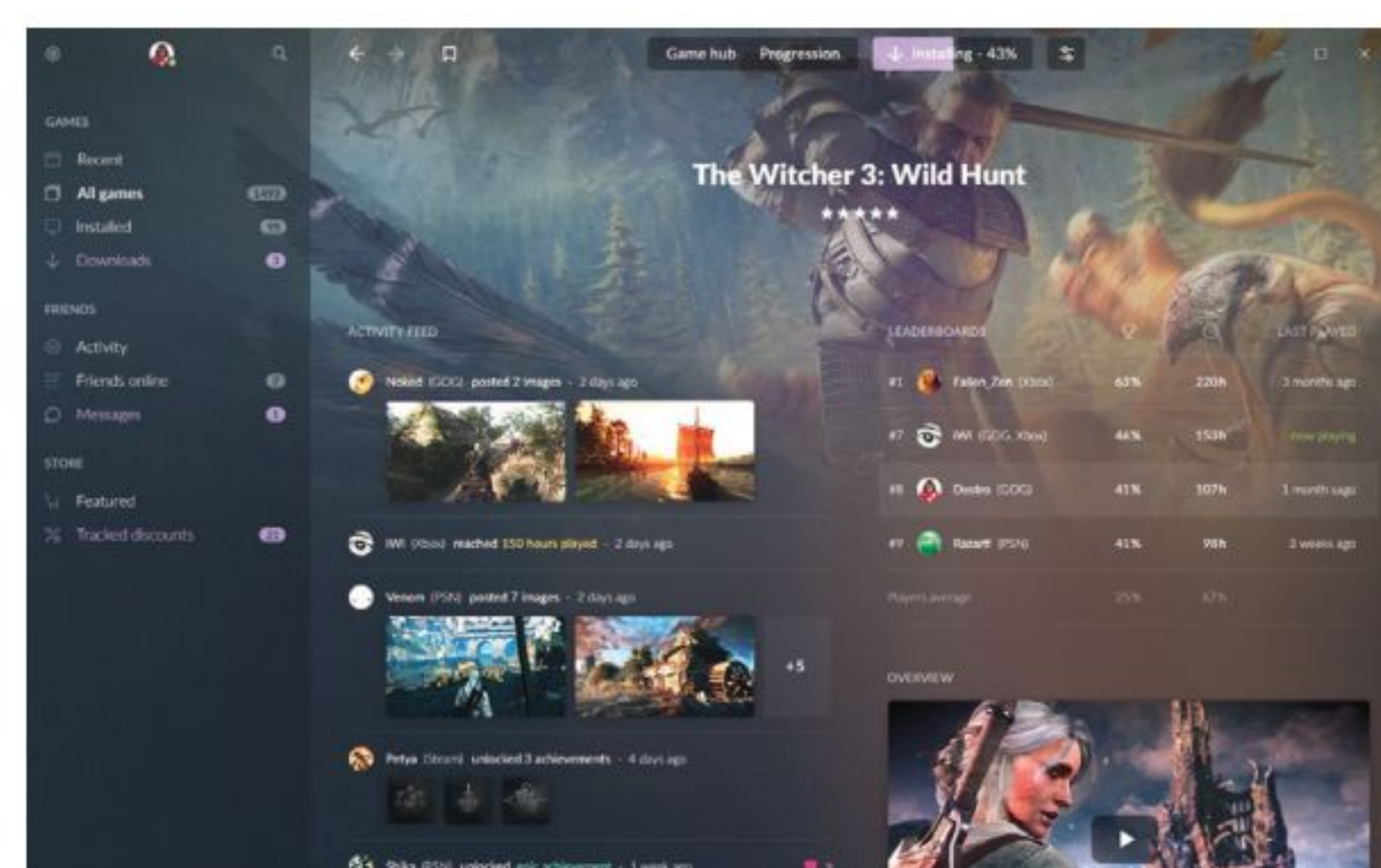
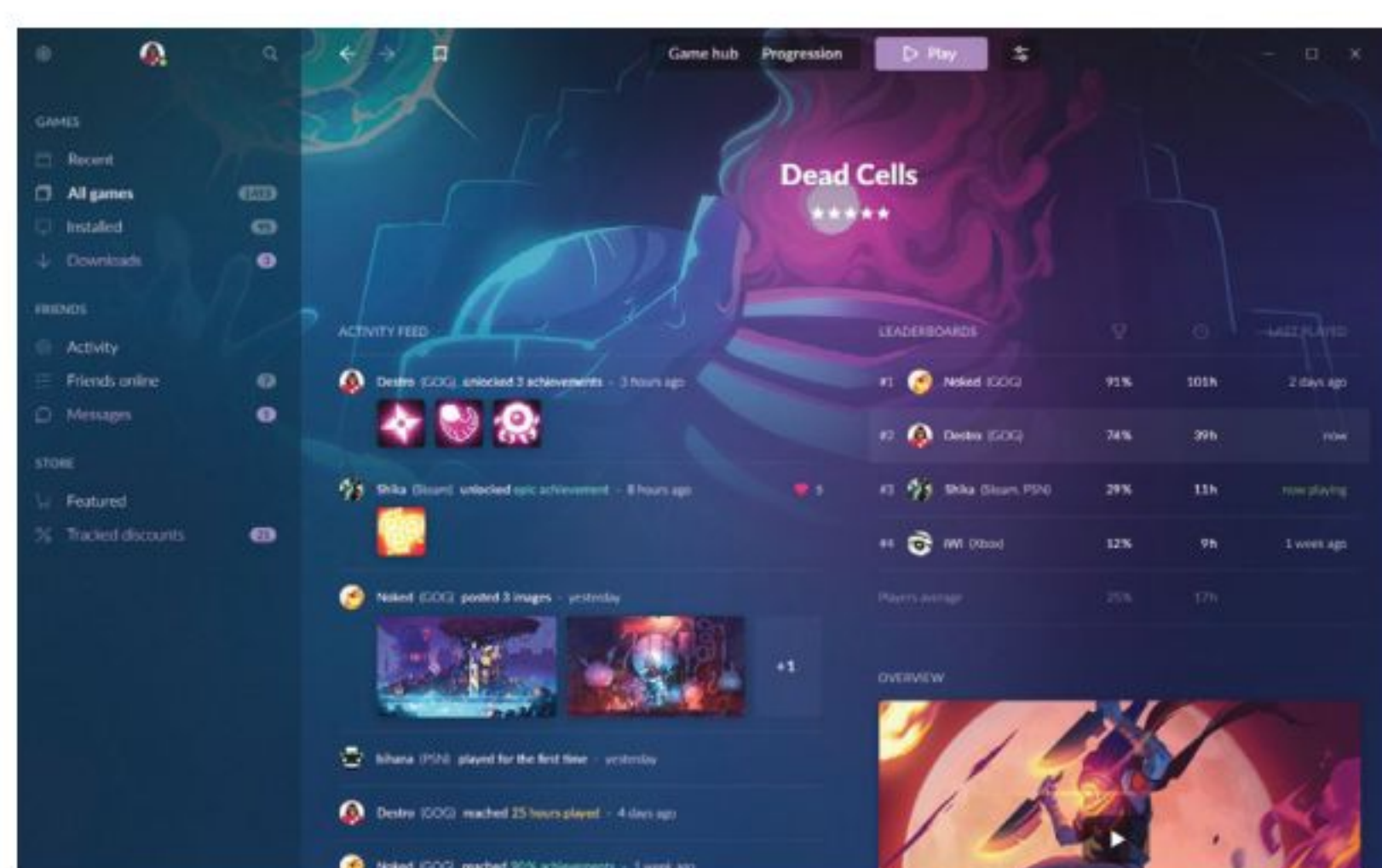
Pub brawl

Valve takes a 30 per cent cut of games sold on Steam. Naturally, publishers would rather avoid that and capture players on their own bespoke platforms if they can, but the result is a divided gaming community spread across multiple different services.

RIGHT: It'll take some pruning to organise your library.

FAR RIGHT: Plenty of social features are in the works.

BELOW: A tagging system lets you filter to easily find games.



STORE WARS

How the client competition stacks up



STEAM

The ubiquitous grey monolith that still dominates digital retail on PC. Still the one to beat.



ORIGIN

A serviceable home for EA's catalogue. This is where games like *Battlefield* and *The Sims* live.



UPLAY

Use your achievement points to unlock new items in Ubisoft games like *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*.



EPIC GAMES STORE

The upstart that's short on features, and keen on exclusivity deals.

from our servers as well. It's one-click import and one-click remove."

Once you've built your cohesive library, you can launch those games directly without logging into further programs. In the demo I'm shown, GOG launches a game in seconds without any intermediary steps.

If you have ever forgotten a game existed because it's tucked away in Origin, Galaxy will be of obvious benefit, but there are also powerful sorting tools and your library can be tweaked to your needs. You can sort games by genre tags, or series tags that can pull up, for example, every *Assassin's Creed* game you own. Fancy playing a shooter? Sort the library by games with the uninstalled tag, and the FPS tag, and take your pick. GOG has anticipated that Galaxy's library could contain a thousand or more games for avid hobbyists, so the search and filter functions are extensive and heavily customisable.

This does require some admin on the user's part, and I look forward to the UI being refined over time. Galaxy can pull a lot of information about your games when you link it to a client, but if you want naming conventions to sync up across your library, or want to create precise tags, you have to do a bit of organisational work. Galaxy also keeps track of game stats like 'time played' and lets you compare stats with other players in your friends list.

For GOG, social features are almost as important as providing a unified game library. "In the early days we had this one sentence that stayed in our head like an

earworm that wouldn't let go: all the games and friends in one place," says Karwowski. "That means GOG Galaxy 2.0 will import the games from different PC platforms with activities, achievements, and stats."

SOCIAL SPACE

Eventually GOG wants to provide a unified friends list that let you chat with a cross platform version of your friends list. GOG also hopes that plugins will give it new functionality. Karwowski gives the example of a plugin that might let you stream Xbox games to a Mac or PC.

Galaxy 2.0 has identified an area of friction for those of

us with games scattered across various services. It's already promising more features than the Epic Game Store which, as I write this, still doesn't even let you type in the name of a game to search your library. It's also a prescient move at

a time when the big platform players like Microsoft are looking to adopt a 'play anything, anywhere' service for the next generation of games they publish.

GOG Galaxy 2.0 might be about to run headfirst into new forms of game distribution, most notably subscription services and, further down the line, streaming services. The notion of a mega-client that houses downloadable games may, in time, become obsolete. Until then, Galaxy 2.0 should solve a lot of annoying PC gaming problems. The service is in closed beta testing, but you can sign up at gogalaxy.com. ■

Tom Senior

"GOG GALAXY 2.0 WILL IMPORT THE GAMES FROM DIFFERENT PC PLATFORMS"

In Focus

THE HIDDEN DETAILS OF DESIGN



WILD THINGS

Mobius Digital's art director Wesley Martin and tech artist Logan Ver Hoef on making **OUTER WILDS'** worlds worth exploring. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

LOOK CLOSER

1 "All planets are defined by their large-scale system. We wanted to enhance the sense of place in each area, so we went with low-detail backgrounds, with highly detailed elements to naturally draw players to them."

- Wesley Martin

GEEK SQUAD

2 "The Nomai are basically a race of science geeks, so in the design for their ruins we referenced a lot of human cultures with the same tendencies, such as the Mayans and Native Americans, who try to live in conjunction with nature."

- Logan Ver Hoef

ONLY U AND I

3 "With the simplistic UI we ask players to be more observant. Audiovisual cues should be a natural part of the world. That way, you don't come to rely on artificial systems to tell you how much time and resources you have left."

- Logan Ver Hoef

CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER

4 "The map, developed in response to a playtest, is a way to help players organise their thoughts without giving them directives. With this, they can self-direct, which is a core idea in *Outer Wilds*' design philosophy, and it got them really curious."

- Wesley Martin

CH-CH-CH-CHANGES

5 "One core pillar established early on was that the environment of each planet had to change over time, that makes it more interesting to explore. You can't have a planet fall apart permanently though, so we developed the time reset."

- Logan Ver Hoef

AU NATURALE

6 "We came up with a 'national park aesthetic', which is based on NASA's old national park advertisements. This feeling of camping in space is reinforced by campfires, the presence of natural materials and a more naturalistic colour palette."

- Wesley Martin

RIGHT: A postcard in the colourful style of NASA's Space Tourism posters.



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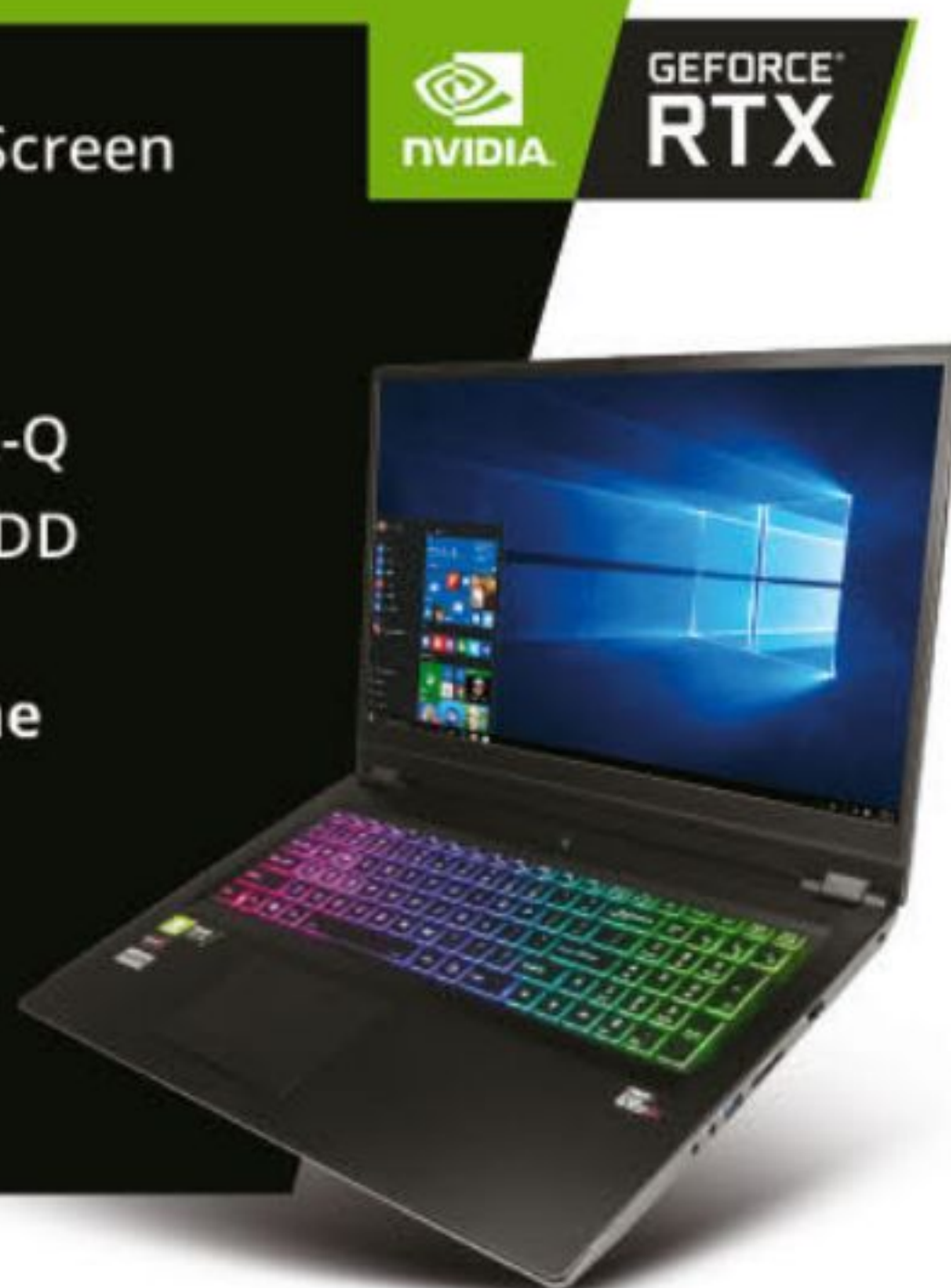
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PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

October 25, 2019

DEVELOPER

Obsidian Entertainment

PUBLISHER

Private Division

LINK

outerworlds.obsidian.net

THE OUTER WORLDS

Honesty isn't the best policy in Obsidian's first-person RPG

A lot of games have extra-difficult ways to play. You can finish *Deus Ex* without killing anyone, sneak through *Dishonored* without being detected, and play *Thief* with zero combat. Phil and I each played about 90 minutes of *The Outer Worlds*, Obsidian Entertainment's upcoming RPG, and I can already predict the toughest way to complete it.

It'll be making it through the entire game without ever telling a lie. It's got to be nearly impossible, because in just this short session alone the two of us bluffed constantly. I lied to a drug dealer who hired me to track down his missing stashes, telling him I couldn't find them so I could keep the drugs for myself. Phil lied to a weeping mother about the fate of her missing son and claimed to be a professional athlete so he could investigate a gambler's murder. I lied to an animal rescue worker, a corporate security guard, and a shop vendor so I could get my hands on an item I wanted. I even disguised myself as an employee of a factory so I could murder the owner, and when the disguise failed I lied my way out of trouble. Twice.

There are so many opportunities to lie, and there's so much to be gained from dishonesty. Plus, being a huge liar is just fun. A squeaky clean, completely honest playthrough of *The Outer Worlds* – that's going to be the true nightmare mode.

Of course, the quality of a lie needs to be matched by the quality of the people you're lying to, and thankfully the small slice of *The Outer Worlds* I experienced was full of enjoyable and eccentric characters. The NPCs I spoke to were well-written and voiced, and I spent a lot of my playtime just listening to everything they had to say and wishing I made more time to talk (and lie) to everyone else.

PLAYED IT

In the town of Fallbrook on the planet Monarch, I took a job from Nelson Mayson, a drug distributor with a bowler hat, a curled moustache, and a charming lack of subtlety. "Might I interest you in a surefire scheme?" he asked. "Wink, wink." Yes, he actually said "wink".

His scheme was hiring me to find his drug shipment – he'd been using alien critters called sprats to move his product, and unsurprisingly the little beasts had all disappeared. I recovered the drugs, first from some sprat corpses, and then from digging through piles of sprat poop. Both times I reported back to Mayson that I hadn't found a thing. He was upset but I walked away with a pocketful of drugs I assume can be put to some use.

I also chatted with a young and polite insurance agent who explained to me, at great length, the various insurance options available on Monarch, including a policy to protect the expressive eyebrows of character actors and "corporate executives with menacing stares". They cover dismemberment (the policy is half-off, ha ha), disastrous marriages, and salesmen who lie about the shoddy products they sell. One of the only things they don't cover is "dullness of mind", which, when pressed, she admits is another way of saying "stupidity".

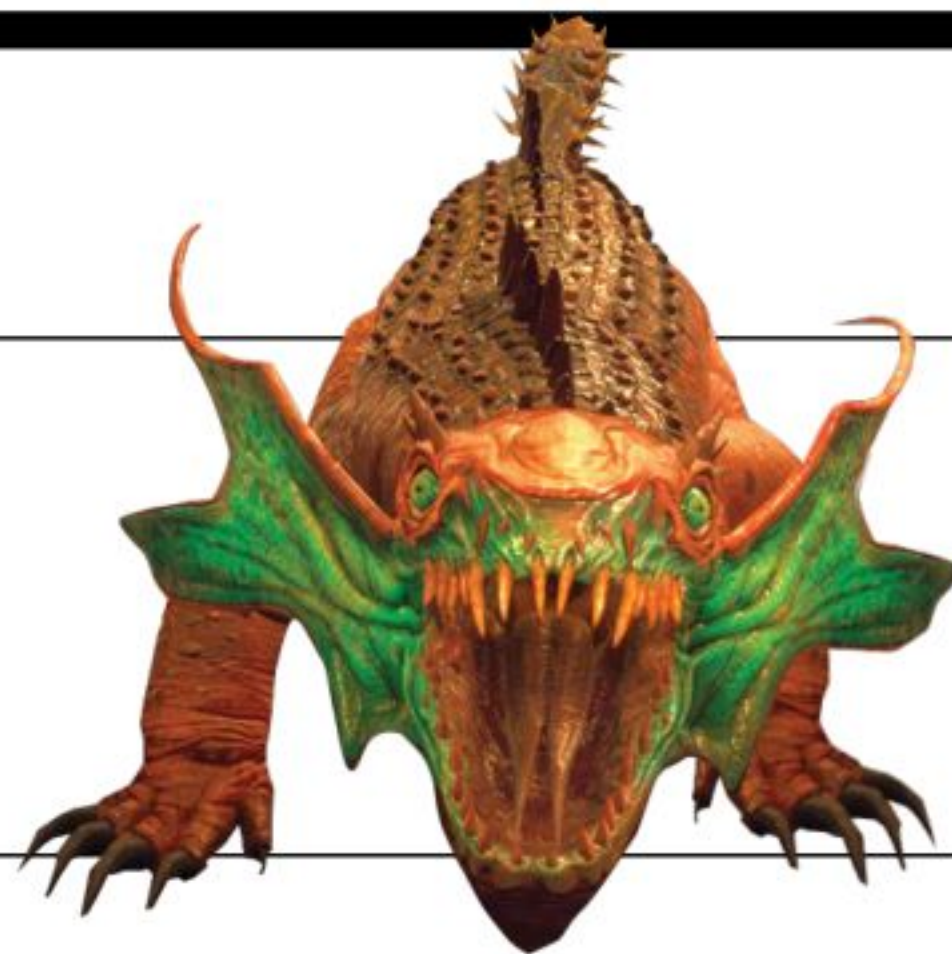
I also met Catherine Malin, the enjoyably gruff proprietor of Malin's House of Hospitality. She's apparently a bit of a crime boss in Fallbrook, and our conversation quickly turned to the owner of a factory she wanted to claim for herself. When I said it sounded like the job would involve murder and mayhem, she replied, "Stars! I hope so!". Another character not burdened with subtlety.

A DISHONEST BUCK

There were lesser characters, too, who still proved enjoyable in small doses, like a robotic sentry who caught me sneaking around the factory. I disabled the bot by feeding him a paradox, "This statement is false." There were intimidating yet easily

>>

I LIED TO AN ANIMAL RESCUE WORKER, A SECURITY GUARD, AND A SHOP VENDOR

The Outer Worlds

» bamboozled corporate sentinels, a snooty fellow not named just Chet but 'The Chet', and a nerdy animal rescue worker who called me a "domicile-intruder" when I walked into his house.

Nearly everywhere I turned in Fallbrook, there was someone to talk to or listen to, and even the conversations that didn't result in new missions always provided amusement or information that helped fill in a picture of the off-kilter world I was lying my way through.

To fill the gap between conversations, I did plenty of shooting in *The Outer Worlds*, too. Monarch has roads that seem mostly safe apart from the occasional band of marauders and their vicious pets, but wander off the beaten path and things very quickly get much more dangerous. I decided to tackle the personal quest of one of the two companions following me, a woman named Nyoka, which involved finding the grave of a former friend located in the swamps outside Fallbrook.

I was playing a character who was level 11, armed with an assault rifle with a modded 'Exact-O-Sight' scope for sniper shots, a pistol, a sword that did toxic damage, and a heavy machine gun. I'd later replace my sword with a Tossball Blocker – Tossball being a sci-fi sport in *The Outer Worlds*, and the blocker being the implement you use to play it, sort of like a tennis racket, only with a crackling energy field instead of strings. (I don't yet know the rules of Tossball, but the scoop is very handy for beating alien lizards to death, so I'm sure hoping I'll get to see a Tossball match played at some point.)

I'm happy the dialogue has so many appealing options because if there's a part of *The Outer Worlds* I'm skeptical of, it's definitely the combat. Most of the enemies I faced – typically medium and large sized dinosaur-types – don't seem especially dynamic or interesting to fight. They roar, they lumber after you, they spit goo or fire, and the big ones take a ton of damage before they drop.

There's a stiffness to the gunplay that harkens back to *Fallout 3*, more RPG than shooter. The animations are nicely done but the heavy machine-gun barely has any recoil, which makes it feel tame even as it chews through rampaging aliens. The

melee feels weightless – slicing or bludgeoning a foe should make an impact but it just feels like swinging through air, even when you connect. The combat isn't terrible by any stretch – it just felt insubstantial, and even in the short play session I got a bit tired of mowing down the same pack of angry dinos again and again. The full game will need far more interesting weapons and enemy types to keep combat engaging.

I do appreciate the power to slow down time in short bursts, which helps with landing headshots on strafing marauders or with pinpointing Mantipillars, the one enemy I did enjoy fighting. They're large caterpillar-types who spit plasma, then quickly curl up in a ball and roll away, then pop back up for more spitting. Companions can be put to good use – tap a hotkey to unleash their special attacks which do big bursts of damage, and give you a quick break from the combat as you watch their attack animations play.

CHARM OFFENSIVE

As for the planet itself, between Phil and I we only visited two main towns and some of the surrounding areas – the map and signposts point to several others. While *The Outer Worlds* isn't a completely open world experience, even the small areas we got to travel through still felt pretty big, and with all the NPCs hanging around and not enough time to meet them all, there was a lot that went undone.

And I know I've been focusing on all the lying we did, but there are other skill-based conversational options – persuasion, charm, and intimidation – that I put to use to open up new avenues and possibilities in the chats I had. And even without skill checks, most conversations give you a choice of attitudes, allowing you to top pay the role of anything from a polite do-gooder to, you know, kind of a dick.

Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to explore the character-building aspects of *The Outer Worlds* – the character I was given was already built. But I did see that your companions have perks, and some of their skills can buff your own. In fact, I was very happy to see I could unlock a skill for Nyoka called Bonus Support Lie, which would increase my own lying skill when she was with me. That's definitely a first pick for me.

See? More lies. I'm telling you, a completely honest playthrough of *The Outer Worlds* is going to be a near-impossibility – and that's the truth.

Chris Livingston



Lying will only get you so far in this situation.



A TENNIS RACKET, ONLY WITH A CRACKLING ENERGY FIELD INSTEAD OF STRINGS



PREVIEW

The Surge 2

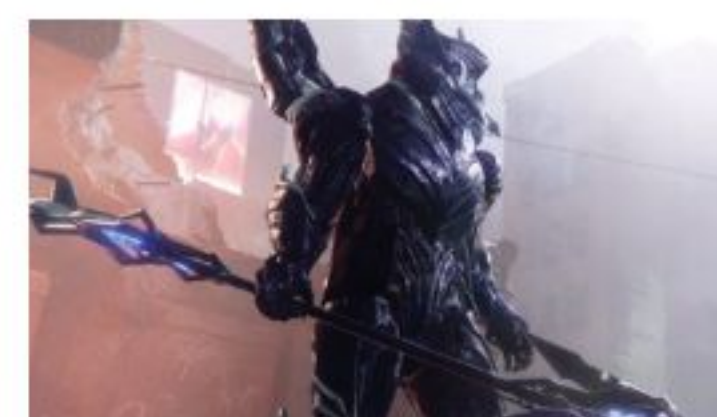
The enemy designs have only gotten more bizarre.



Some weapons have different modes.



Robotic and organic enemies feel very different to fight.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2019DEVELOPER
Deck13PUBLISHER
Focus Home InteractiveLINK
www.thesurge-game.com

THE SURGE 2

The sci-fi *Souls*-like is back for another scrap

Would it be reductive to call the first *Surge* 'Dark Souls with robots'? Probably, but let's be real – that's what it was. Not that Deck13 didn't have a few ideas of its own, like being able to target different parts of an enemy. But it was pretty much *Dark Souls* with robots. As for the sequel, it's more of the same in many ways, but already shaping up to be a better, slicker game.

The first big change you'll notice is that you can now create your own character, replacing the rather bland forced protagonist from the original game. You can also select a backstory, although I've yet to determine how this will be reflected in the game. Characters include a war veteran suffering from PTSD, an arms smuggler, and a corporate suit. However, whichever background you select, every freshly made character begins the game in the same place – a high security prison in Jericho City.

The city is under lockdown as a group called the AID attempts to control the spread of a scary techno-virus. Across its ruins you'll find scanner gates protected by powerful guards, which you can choose to attack head-on or cleverly bypass. You'll also have scavengers to contend with, whose EXO suits are made from old car parts and other junk.

Although the combat hasn't changed that much, the animation is smoother and there's a greater sense of physicality to everything you do. It all feels really fast and snappy, which sets the game apart from the slower, weightier combat of other

Souls-likes. You have two main attacks – horizontal and vertical – the results of which can vary greatly depending on what weapons you have equipped and the combos you pull off with them. And, of course, even the most basic grunt-like enemy can batter you if you're careless, meaning you have to make smart use of locking, blocking, and dodging.

Another big change in *The Surge 2* is found in how ranged combat works. It feels less finicky, but there's additional depth to it as well. You can use modules to change how ranged weapons work, for instance creating a weapon that fires a stronger shot but uses more ammo. The way health works has also been tweaked to encourage you to be more aggressive in combat. Attack an enemy and your battery will charge, and you can either use that stored energy to heal yourself, or make lopping off an enemy's limb easier. As in the first game, severing limbs is how you find better gear.

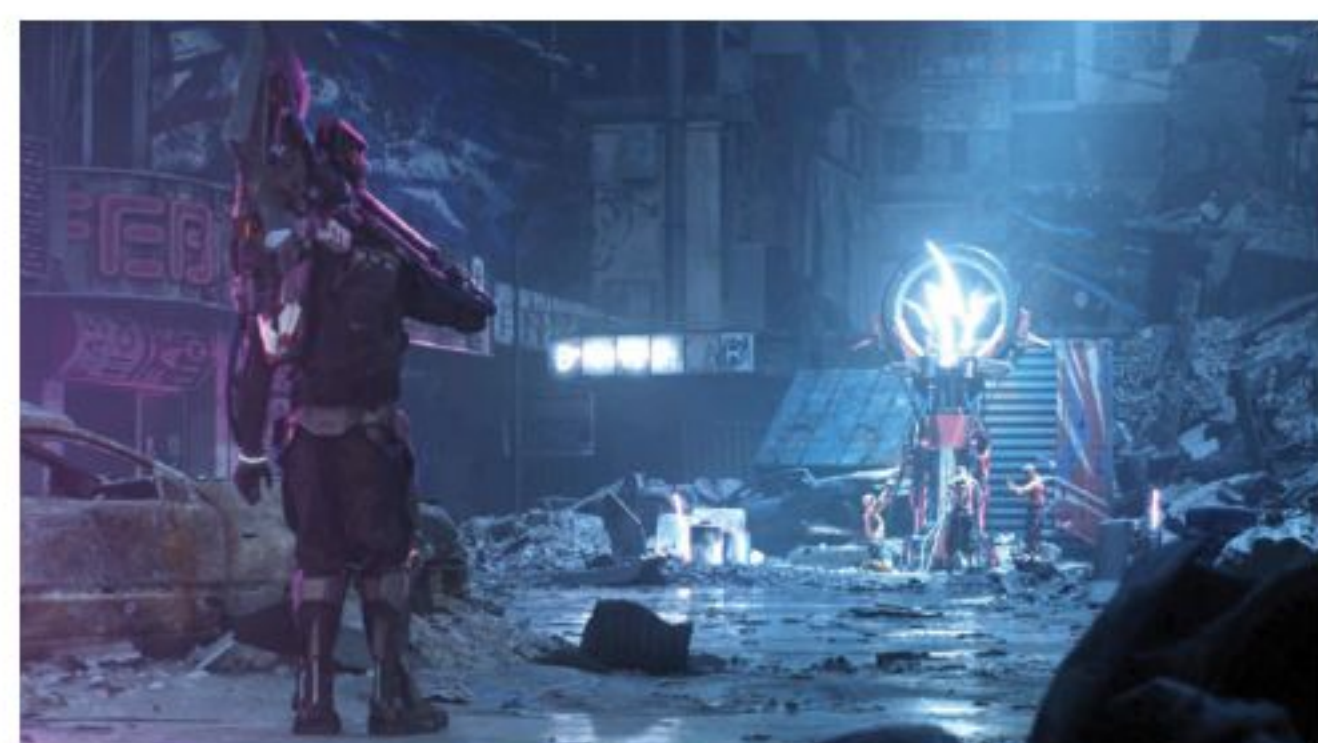
REWARDING EXPLORING

Also new to the sequel is the ability to leave messages for other players in the form of graffiti, warning them of upcoming danger or, more likely, trying to trick them into danger. I also like that some more freedom has been implemented when it comes to navigating the world. A head-on assault on one of those scanner gates will probably get you killed, but it's possible to take an alternate route – in one example, down an alley, where you also meet an eccentric backstreet doctor who asks you to retrieve a drone that was shot down in the area. Exploration is much more satisfying (and rewarding) in *The Surge 2*, making wandering off the beaten path worthwhile.

Deck13 is also striving to improve the difficulty balance of the game, acknowledging that many players hit a brick wall at the first boss in the original and never returned. That doesn't mean the game is easy, though. Far from it. I lost count of how many times I died in the demo. But there should be fewer sharp, unfair difficulty spikes. *The Surge 2* is more of a refinement of the original than anything else. But it's tighter, deeper, and more varied, and enhances the features that stood out in the first game.

Andy Kelly

ALTHOUGH THE COMBAT HASN'T CHANGED THAT MUCH, THE ANIMATION IS SMOOTHER



The story is lean and mostly woven into the world.

PREVIEW

The Siege and The Sandfox

You can knock out enemies with sneak attacks



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2019

DEVELOPER
Cardboard Sword

PUBLISHER
Chucklefish

LINK
thesiegeandthesandfox.co.uk

THE SIEGE AND THE SANDFOX

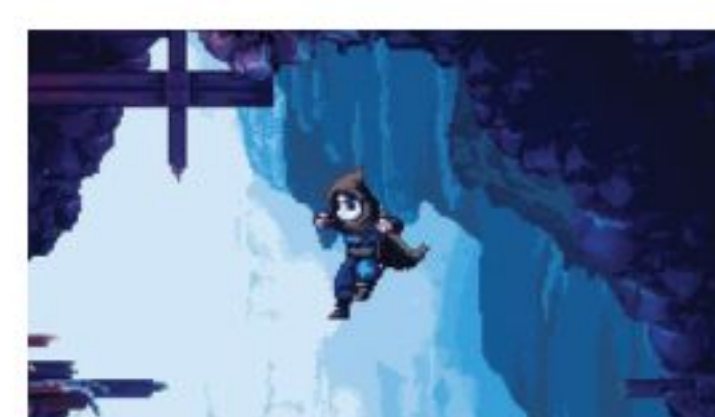
A stealthy Metroidvania with lavish pixel art

This beautiful new stealth game from Cardboard Sword begins with its titular hero, the Sandfox, being slung into a dungeon, accused of a murder he didn't commit. The dungeon is crawling with guards, meaning our protagonist has to get stealthy.

PLAYED IT

At first glance, the most striking thing about *The Siege and The Sandfox* is its pixel art. This is an impossibly lavish-looking game, with a remarkable amount of detail squeezed into its environments. Far from a dreary underground maze of stone, this dungeon is alive with cascading waterfalls and torches that cast a hazy orange glow over the level.

Being in the Metroidvania mould, the Sandfox is pretty underpowered at the outset of the game. But over time you unlock new powers and gadgets, including the ability to wall run and pick locks. Our hero is pretty nimble too, able to hang off platforms, jump across wide gaps, and



leap between poles. This, plus the Arabian Nights feel of the art and story, and use of a narrator, reminds me of *Prince of Persia* in the best possible way.

The Sandfox also has a neat little knee slide, which lets you duck under traps and closing doors. The animation is fantastic and the character feels more weighty than you might expect from a side-scrolling 2D game. I also like how the enemies have AI, following patrol routes and reacting to you. In my demo being attacked meant an instant death, although you may be able to fight back later in the game.

You can, however, knock enemies out if you sneak up on them unnoticed. This encourages you to make full use of the level design, finding alternate routes and using the Sandfox's climbing abilities to

locate alternate paths. This aspect of the game reminds me a lot of Klei's brilliant *Mark of the Ninja*, although the Sandfox doesn't have a grappling hook to rely on for getting around, at least in the early stage of the game I played.

SOFTLY, SOFTLY

The first hour of the game is a kind of self-contained tutorial, but at a certain point the world opens up and its entire, continuous sprawl is available to you – albeit with some parts gated with certain gear, in true *Metroid* style. But the developer has stated that it wants the game to feel slower and more deliberate than other games in the genre.

The Siege and The Sandfox has been a labour of love for its small team, and has been in development for over three years now. A release date has yet to be confirmed, but the game looks like it's finally on its way to being finished. The brief taster I had in my demo was very promising, and I love the idea of a Metroidvania structure fused with a slow-burning stealth game.

Andy Kelly

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TRUE GAMING

PREVIEW

Monster Hunter World: Iceborne



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
January 2020

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.monsterhunter.com

MONSTER HUNTER WORLD: ICEBORNE

Extraordinary monsters in a beautiful winter wonderland

Monster Hunter is hilarious. I'm wading through a chest-high snow drift as a sinister fin roams around the clearing. The piranha-like Beotodus swims under the snow looking for an opportunity to explode from beneath. My instincts tell me to unsling the enormous sword-axe on my back and fight back, but instead I'm chugging cocoa from a flask.

Just in time the animation finishes, I dive roll sideways as Beotodus erupts from the snow with a spinning tail attack. The monster's body clips me and I fall backwards onto my butt. A bit of health lost, but it could be worse. The main thing is I have another window I can use to stuff my face. I pull out an enormous chunk of meat and watch the circling fin again as I chomp, chomp, chomp.

High-risk snacking is an integral part of the *Monster Hunter* experience, and that's still true in the massive *Iceborne* expansion, which adds a huge snowy zone, new monsters, new weapons, and new crafting opportunities. The Beotodus' claws inflict a new chilling status effect that slowly eats away my stamina bar. The hot drink gives me some resistance to that and other cold effects, and the well done steak restores huge chunks of lost stamina bar.

Later I learn that instead of the hot drink, I could have taken a run through a hot spring to hold back the chill. You can spot these little oases by the gentle heat shimmer, warm colouration, and hosts of tiny otter-things taking a happy bath.

HIGH-RISK SNACKING IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE MONSTER HUNTER EXPERIENCE

Iceborne really wants you to feel the cold. Frost coats your weapon as you fight, snow deforms under your feet, and drifts can slow you down at crucial moments.

After spending a few hours with *Iceborne*, I don't know what more I could want from a *Monster Hunter World* expansion. I'm not really interested in new weapon archetypes – there are ten or so I still haven't mastered – but the addition of new grappling moves and combo possibilities does enough to broaden the charge blade moveset I'm familiar with.

You use left-trigger to aim the grapple and press circle to launch it at a monster. The range is deceptively short, so it's something you use when you're already close to combat engagement range. If you hit, you grapple to the monster's hide. From there you can hop between sections – haunch, to back, to head – and land a couple of strong blows before dismounting. It's a different attack to the familiar leap-to-back that lets you repeatedly stab the monster. The grapple is good for closing on a monster that likes to dart about quickly, and it lets you target body parts. Smashing Beotodus' legs stops it from afflicting you with that nasty chilled debuff.

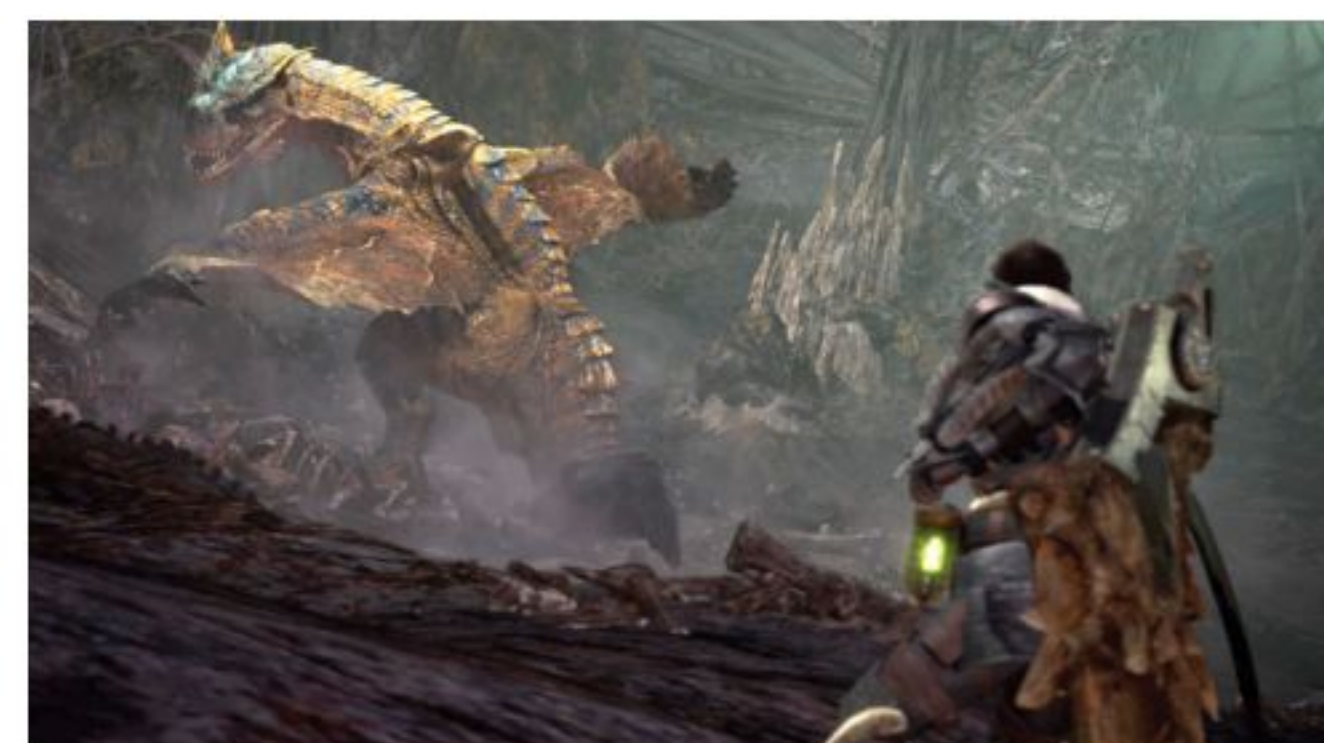
WRAP UP WARMLY

The new landmass is larger than any of the existing zones. The four or five areas I explored were relatively flat, but the north of the map is dominated by a mountain where I'd hope to see taller locations reminiscent of the coral highlands. There are a few underground caverns too, where the floor is a glossy sheet of blue ice.

There are a lot of other small but welcome additions. Overclothes let you keep your armour set bonuses but change your appearance to be more fitting for the wintry climes of *Iceborne*. There's a new camp where your utilities are much more easy to access. Crucially, there's a new chef brigade in the kitchen. I don't know why the sight of a homely cat massaging salt flakes into a hunk of beef makes me smile, but that's the peculiar charm of *Monster Hunter*. Sure, it's a game about hunting down beautiful creatures and stealing their bones, but it's all done with a powerful sense of enthusiasm and fun. *Monster Hunter* is hilarious.

Tom Senior

Watch out for Banbaro's hefty charging attacks



The new base Seliana is a good bit more convenient





Tigrex returns to chomp on your face

PREVIEW

Ghost Recon Breakpoint

Teamwork, making
the dream work.



God bless you, waist high
stacks of crates and pallets.



Ghost Recon Breakpoint



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 4, 2019

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Paris

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

LINK
www.ghostrecon.com

GHOST RECON
BREAKPOINT

Enjoy sneaky team gunplay in spacious, deadly maps

"I think I've got him," our sniper hisses over comms. A shot rings out and I see his bullet lash across the map. "Oh," he says. "That's just a rock."

We laugh, but then fall silent, suddenly worried. There's no way the other team didn't see the bullet, and the highly visible bullet trail exposes our sniper's position. In *Ghost Recon Breakpoint's* multiplayer, the team that spots the enemy first stands a great chance of winning the round. It's a four vs four team deathmatch mode with a heavy emphasis on stealth. Our cover is broken, so it's time to change position.

We move in pairs, carefully darting from cover to cover. The map is a shipping yard full of large corrugated containers and cranes. The main PvE side of *Breakpoint* is set in an open world, and these maps form part of it. However, they have been carefully designed with multiplayer in mind. There are flanking routes if you prefer short-range weapons, and sniping spots. Randomised loot can give you access to different types of grenade and, importantly, a scout drone. You can send the drone high over the battlefield and attempt to spot the other team.

I played six or seven rounds with strangers, with headset mics on. Ubisoft representatives recommended that we communicate constantly and report any glimpses of movement. Played this way the game is a lot of fun. We had tense games where we were able to revive each

other and turn around a bad situation. Changing weather conditions and large maps created plenty of variety, which is useful in a mode that's designed to be played an awful lot in parallel with the open world co-op game.

Your character moves seamlessly from open world PvE to PvP. The idea is that whatever you choose to do in *Breakpoint* you will make some sort of progress for your avatar. Skills and loadouts carry across from the open world but, crucially, guns are balanced differently for PvP combat. This lets the developers tweak the PvP gun ecology without fear of unbalancing missions or introducing errant overpowered weapons into the open world. It sidesteps a nightmare that Bungie has experienced trying to keep *Destiny 2's* unified gun meta under control. There are no spectacular space guns in *Breakpoint* though – it hews close to the series' traditional modern military aesthetic, and feels more sober in tone than *Ghost Recon Wildlands*.

UNIVERSAL SOLIDER

Though this is another extension of the never-ending Tom Clancyverse, the shooting is surprisingly forgiving. We often aimed high in the first few rounds expecting bullet drop, but shots go pretty much where you point them. The guns have some kick so it helps to feather your shots at the limits of a gun's effective range, but that's the only concession to the idea that this is a serious military sim. Since *Advanced Warfighter*, *Ghost Recon* has been more interested in making you feel like a cool near-future soldier rather than seriously simulating it – this is the action movie version where you get to play with drones and, during night maps, activate night vision as that satisfying 'shwiiiiing' power up noise happens.

I enjoyed my time with it, but as with all games that require close teamwork, there's no guarantee of a good experience playing with strangers. The movement, cover, and weapons all feel better than *Wildlands*, which bodes well for the open world part of the game, but I wonder if the muted military fantasy will be enough to pull players away from shooters such as *The Division 2* or even *Rainbow Six Siege*.

Tom Senior

CHANGING WEATHER
CONDITIONS AND LARGE MAPS
CREATED PLENTY OF VARIETY

Panto voice: "He's behind you!"

PREVIEW

Blacksad: Under the Skin



Editor's note: Samuel left the company before writing captions.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November

DEVELOPER
Microids

PUBLISHER
Dargaud

LINK
blacksadmania.com

BLACKSAD: UNDER THE SKIN

Animal detective fun that reminds you of *The Wolf Among Us*

Blacksad is a series of Spanish-created, French-published graphic novels about a cat in a long coat who solves mysteries. I read the first volume earlier this year. They're simple and compelling noir mysteries set in a world of humanoid animals, and if you can forgive a few eyebrow-raising female character designs, I give them a strong recommendation.

This game is impressively faithful to the tone of those books, and it'll probably remind most people of Telltale's *The Wolf Among Us*, given that you're solving a mystery while interacting with talking animals. But while *Blacksad: Under the Skin* uses a similar cinematic presentation to recent Telltale games, it also contains the kind of puzzles you'd expect from a traditional point-and-click adventure, for better or worse. You play as John Blacksad (yes, the cat is called John) in this strange animal-dominated version of '50s New York, and you're trying to solve the mystery of why a boxing ring owner has (seemingly) killed himself, and why in a related matter, a boxer has gone missing right before a fight.

The demo I played started in John's office as a rhino entered spoiling for a scrap. John got hold of photos of the rhino cheating on his wife (what a sentence this is turning out to be), and he's not happy about it. The ensuing brawl plays out in the form of a QTE, which is fairly rote, but the action is fun – headbutting a rhino in close quarters combat when you're a cat

probably isn't a good idea. After John avoids taking a bullet and the fight ends, I can choose how to resolve the scuffle. I decided to tell the rhino I wouldn't reveal the cheating to his wife – though I turned down his offer of hush money.

Later, though, I picked up the phone and told his wife about the cheating anyway. It's not a perfect sequence of choices when it comes to either money making or telling the truth, but I wanted to see how the game would react to a conflicting choice like that.

Sure enough, in a later scene the rhino would confront John about his subsequent change of heart, which is a cool way of demonstrating consequences for small decisions in *Blacksad*. Some repeated lip sync issues aside, the characters are nicely animated, and John's quietly gruff voice actor is a spot-on choice for a surly, troubled and charming cat who's always trying to crack a case.

CATTY CHOICES

Outside of the choices in conversations, the game feels more like a traditional adventure game, as you explore small-ish environments looking for clues to advance the story. You can then piece clues together in a menu screen that represents John's detective brain at work. I didn't do a whole lot of that, though, because despite finding plenty of clues around the environments in this demo, none of them quite added up to a solution that pushed the game forward.

The pace seems fairly languid. I actually wouldn't mind *Blacksad* being a bit firmer in telegraphing what you're supposed to do next, since I'm more interested in the dialogue choice side of things, rather than listlessly picking through environments.

The developers have delayed the game to November from its original September date, and I think that was a wise move – it could use a bit of polish. As well as clues being a bit easier to find, I'd prefer some clearer QTE prompts for certain actions, and better lip-syncing. The cult appeal of the graphic novels feels like it's carried over, though, and there's a lot to like about the characters and story. What other game in 2019 offers this scenario?

Samuel Roberts



OK, so what's this? Cats, huh. Cool.



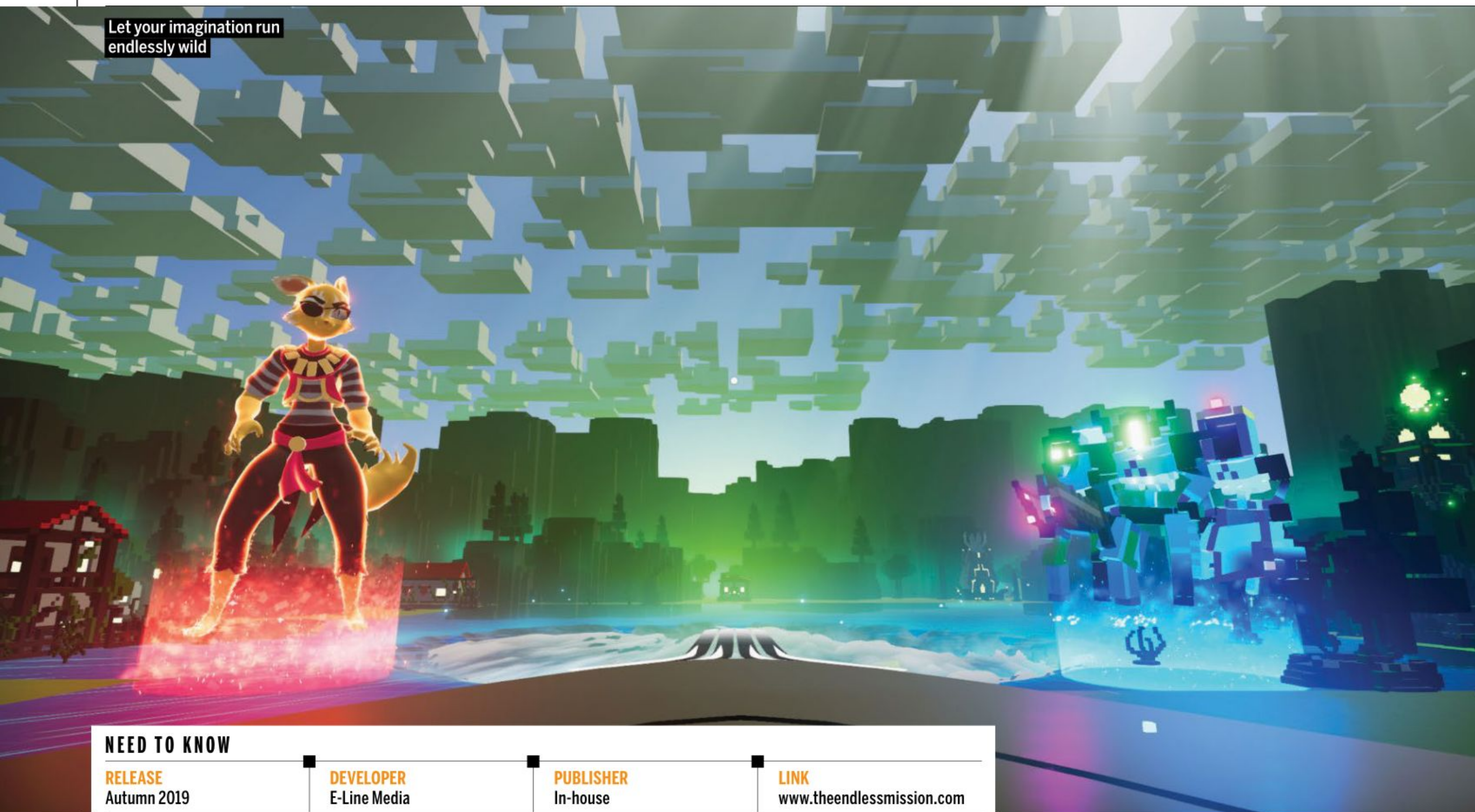
THE DEMO STARTED IN JOHN'S OFFICE AS A RHINO ENTERED SPOILING FOR A SCRAP



PREVIEW

The Endless Mission

Let your imagination run endlessly wild



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Autumn 2019

DEVELOPER
E-Line Media

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.theendlessmission.com

THE ENDLESS MISSION

Mash up genres in this ambitious creation game

So enamoured is the developer of *The Endless Mission* with user-generated content, they wrote a massive seven-part history of it for the game's Steam page. This intriguing sandbox-style creation game has a creative spirit at its heart, encouraging players to destroy, build, remix, and tweak its various systems to create their own unique experiences.

FIRST LOOK

"You're invited into a world within our own," the developer says. "A conflict is unfolding between those who shape technology and those who are shaped by it." The story will take you through an "ever-expanding collection of classic game genres", which I see glimpses of in a trailer.

I spot a futuristic *Wipeout*-style racer, a colourful 3D platformer, and a real-time strategy, which are apparently just the tip of the iceberg. RPGs, first-person shooters, and sports games are all apparently in the works. But the clever thing about *The Endless Mission* is being



able to blend these genres using a set of intuitive creation tools.

So if you want to make a real-time strategy platformer, a kart racing RPG, or some other bizarre, rule-breaking hybrid game, you can. The game also allows for on-the-fly modding, for example using a set of sliders to adjust the jump height, gravity, and other elements of a 3D platformer as you play the game. And if you want to dive deeper you can even manipulate the code itself to make more complex changes to how the game plays.

"Build them better, faster, stronger," says the developer. "All with a simple slide or click. Modify game elements ranging from speed and health to enemy awareness in real-time." The developer also promises that the game is flexible

enough to be used for other, non-games projects. "Built on Unity, the toolset for our game gives you the opportunity to manipulate levels and assets to create whatever you can imagine."

And, naturally, once you've built something, you can share it with people online. "Make something awesome and upload it to our content portal so your friends and people around the world have the chance to play it." The developer will highlight the best user creations every week, featuring the best ones on the front page, which is a nice incentive.

IF YOU BUILD IT...

The Endless Mission will be released this autumn via Steam Early Access and come with three genres: an RTS, a 3D platformer, and a racing game. But more will be added over time, and community feedback will shape the game as it heads towards a full release. This is an ambitious idea for a game, if you can even call it that, and I'll be interested to see how powerful those creation tools are once the wider world gets its hands on them.

Andy Kelly

RPGS, FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS, AND SPORTS GAMES ARE ALL IN THE WORKS

SongBird & Symphony



The cutest musical platformer ever composed is now available on
Nintendo Switch, PlayStation[®] 4 and Steam!



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— THE 37th —
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Introducing **HUMANKIND**, the
Sega-backed *Civ* killer from the
Endless Legend devs.





COVER FEATURE

AGE



By Jeremy
Peel



COVER FEATURE

Humankind

On ground level, the street that houses Amplitude Studios is a uniform block of contemporary cafés, flats and office buildings. But stand on the eighth floor balcony and the first thing you'll notice is the 1930s. The concrete dome of the Église du Saint-Esprit glints under a Parisian sun, and beyond stands a strange urban mountain, the artificial peak of the Parc Zoologique de Paris. Downwind, on a breezy day, you can smell the monkey faeces.

These are the monuments of a people who left their mark on the world. Achievements that survived assimilation into the cultures that followed, becoming part of the fabric of a nation. They are emblematic of *Humankind*, Sega's new Civ rival from the makers of *Endless Legend*.

"The reason we created Amplitude was to make *Humankind*," says studio head Romain de Waubert de Genlis. "It was a dream we had, to create a historical 4X game. We knew it was a big task. It's the Everest of 4X, and you need to learn to climb other mountains first."

And so Amplitude went to space, making its debut with an interstellar empire builder. Then it embraced fantasy, perfecting turn-based expansion across a hexagonal land. The studio dabbled in roguelikes and tower defence for the spin-off *Dungeons of the Endless*, and developed a shared universe to encompass all of its games. It established a rare reputation for storytelling in the strategy genre, and for meaningfully involving fans in design decisions. And then Amplitude signed away its independence to Sega.

"We had to find a partner that would be the big brother to protect us from distractions," says de Waubert de Genlis. "That would give us the means to make this



TOP: Cities can sprawl outward to cover entire regions.

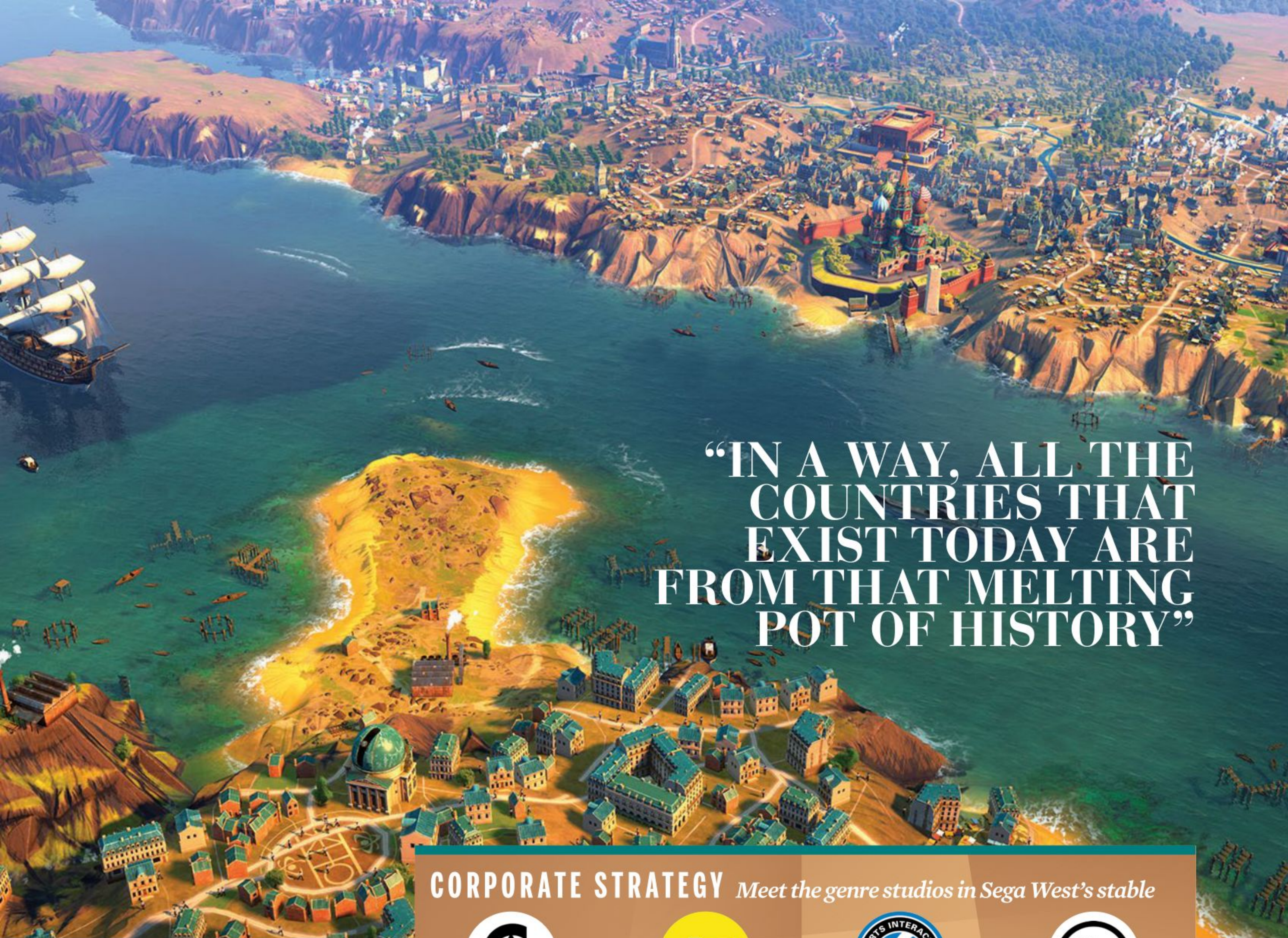
ABOVE: Building next to a volcano might not seem smart, but there are benefits.

LEFT: The Egyptians could disappear, but their buildings won't.

huge game." The Sega acquisition has allowed Amplitude to grow in size, and to work with studios like Creative Assembly on animation and mo-cap. *Humankind* is a triple-A game, and it shows.

The developer is aiming for a release in 2020, but even in pre-pre-alpha, *Humankind* has that ambient beauty that makes a good 4X such a comfortable place to occupy for hundreds of hours. As in *Endless Legend*, this is no flat board but a topographic map in which altitude will influence everything from fog of war to mineral deposits and city defences, a naturally undulating landscape that takes dramatic curves from sea level all the way up to high plateaus. The prehistoric era, where the game begins, it is a green and unspoiled 'Garden of Eden'. You can see the wildlife on the tiles beneath the feet of your tribespeople. And, at much larger scale, the mammoths you might take down as a hunting party. In this exploratory phase, you can split your tribe to cover more territory – but then stand a greater chance of being gored on a tusk, an ignoble end to the founding members of a new society.

Even at this early juncture, you have choices to make – whether to welcome and learn from the other tribes you come across, or hoard food to grow your population free from outside influence. Quickly establishing your first city might give you a headstart, but wandering the world to find wisdom could win you better starting traits, granting your civilisation stronger core DNA.



“IN A WAY, ALL THE COUNTRIES THAT EXIST TODAY ARE FROM THAT MELTING POT OF HISTORY”

Transformation comes the moment the prehistoric era ends. It's here that you'll first pick a culture, from a list of ten, to embody for the next age. Perhaps you'll be the Libyans, or the Nubians. The latter were great with money, and that trait will stick with you even as everything else changes.

“What's crazy when you look at history is that you don't really have a civilisation which has existed from the beginning until the end,” says de Waubert de Genlis. “What you have, in fact, is a succession of cultures that together form civilisations. They're always merging together or reappearing as part of other cultures. In a way, all the countries that exist today are from that melting pot of history. And that's what makes them unique.”

BUILD AN EMPIRE

At the end of the Bronze Age, you'll pick another great civilisation for the following era. The Nubian mastery of commerce might blend particularly well with, say, the Roman knack for empire-building. You can optimise your route through history this way, or you can potter along and enjoy your own story, seeing where circumstance takes you. A new era might hit when you're looking to move on to another part of the map, for instance, in which case a nomadic society would suit just fine.

Over six eras with ten cultures each, you'll shape your nation like the protagonist in an RPG, seeing what kind of people history turns you into – while always remembering where you came from.

That latter point is made easy by Humankind's art direction, which does a marvellous job of conveying a civilisation's journey so far. You can see each culture

CORPORATE STRATEGY *Meet the genre studios in Sega West's stable*



**CREATIVE
ASSEMBLY**
*Total War, a totality of
the time.*



**RELIC
ENTERTAINMENT**
*Last masters of the
classic RTS.*



**SPORTS
INTERACTIVE**
*Football Manager is its
own strategy subgenre.*



**AMPLITUDE
STUDIOS**
*Space and fantasy 4X led
them to Humankind.*



literally layered in the cities of your rivals – the straight streets and long roofs of modern Germany giving way to the occasional pyramid or Forbidden City-inspired palace, revealing Egyptian or Chinese ancestry. Amplitude has built a clever modular system that combines patterns and paints procedurally, so that you can tell a country's path through the past at a glance.

Of course, that also means you can know in advance what you're up against. Just as civilisations carry forward unique traits and buildings from their progenitors, their cultures mould their military too. The Chinese bring rocket carts, and the Romans the Praetorian Guard that can fend off far more advanced units thanks to a powerful adjacency bonus. Even a regiment is a multicultural celebration in *Humankind*, a greatest hits of all your identities through the ages.

Once armies clash, their units spread out across nearby tiles to create a turn-based battlefield where tactical manoeuvres can win the day. The Praetorian Guard might protect a well-placed rocket cart on high ground, but their defence could be circumvented by cavalry. That's the idea, anyway – Amplitude isn't ready to show a fight unfold yet. But it has assigned a dedicated dev team to battle design, which is an important break from form.

In previous Amplitude games, battles were partly automated and designed to last no longer than two minutes. The intention was to prevent military strategy





“YOU CAN’T WIN HISTORY, THAT’S NOT WHAT HAPPENS”

» from dominating every other aspect of empire-building, the way it has in most 4X games to date.

“The thing is,” laughs studio brand director Max Von Knorring, “all our players just asked for tactical battles. So we’re going for it.”

WRITE YOUR OWN HISTORY

But *Humankind* is no conqueror’s playground. This is not a 4X in which you aim to fill the map with your colour by the end of the game. After all, no empire lasts forever. “You can’t win history, that’s not what happens,” says de Waubert de Genlis. “You write history. It’s not about who will be there in the end.”

Humankind is as much about being remembered as growing your territory, and victory is tied to your fame. Fame is a point system in *Humankind*. You acquire stars when you do anything memorable, like building a megalopolis or fighting a momentous battle. And at the end of a game, the points are totted up to determine a winner. What’s fascinating, though, is that fame can be gathered in huge amounts at any point during history, moving the focus away from the endgame.

You’ll need seven stars to advance to the next age, and the quicker you

TOP: That song about the wise man and the rock? Sound strategy.

RIGHT: One day, these guys’ descendants will pay a website to prove they’re Viking.



gather them, the more fame you'll have. But there are a potential 21 stars to earn in each era, so it might make sense to go all in while you're the most powerful empire on the board, mopping up as many stars as you can before moving to the next phase.

The choice to extend the glory years of your civilisation is available during the passage to a new era, too – where you can decide not to become a new culture but instead double-down on the identity you already have. You'll miss out on new traits, buildings, and units, but again, you'll get more fame. The trade-off might even mean you struggle to compete with more advanced civs in the late game – but if you've judged it right, that won't matter. You can watch your territory diminish afterwards as your enemies ally against you, knowing you've built an empire that will live on in memory.

"The Mongols had this huge empire that spanned from China to Europe to northern India," de Waubert de Genlis points out. "And although Mongolia is a small country today, their history, their story, is amazing." While fame is only added up at the end, a game of *Humankind* can effectively be won at any point in history. It's a system that reflects the timelessness of human achievement – China and America might be the

great imperialists of our modern era, but it's the Roman Empire that we remember.

Amplitude believes that its system solves the predictability that plagues the genre's late game. Lead designer Maxence Voleau sums up the issue, "You're in the endgame of a classic 4X, you've won already, but you still need to do the last steps." In the final turns of *Humankind* great empires may be dwindling, having long since traded progress for fame – and there's always time for a new upstart to leave the largest impact on history.

LEAVE YOUR MARK

I wonder whether 4X fans are ready for a game that doesn't hand them the Earth by the end of a campaign – that might see you occupying a modest corner of the map instead. Then again, PC gaming has been changed by the success of *XCOM*, *Crusader Kings II*, and *Dwarf Fortress* – games that have taught players to prize a brilliant anecdote over a boring victory.

"We'll give you markers along the road," says de Waubert de Genlis. "So you understand that yes, you've lost territory. Yes, you've lost colonies. But you're strong, and you're entering the sixth age as the most interesting country, with an amazing story. What you want to do is make sure you survive the last age and make sure we're still talking about you at the end."

It feels like a shame for the writers at Amplitude to hand the pen over to players in *Humankind*. The *Endless* universe is full of funny and fascinating



ABOVE: If you reach the next era quickly you'll get the first pick of the cultures.

LEFT: Forests offer industry bonuses for your cities.

cul-de-sacs. But it makes sense to have great storytellers in charge of the systemic story of history. It's Amplitude who, at the conclusion of a game, will pick out the triumphs to remind you of – chronicling your path through the world in a way that leaves you proud.

"When people raze your city, you'll be very sad," says de Waubert de Genlis. "But some years later you'll be able to dig it up and find all this knowledge from the past. You know you'll come back for it." It's an approach that taps into a fundamental human desire for legacy.

To know that, in the final counting, you made a mark.

There's a genre neighbour looming over Amplitude as it expands outwards. In *Humankind* terms, *Civilization* is the grand old empire. "It's a game that made us want to create this game," says de Waubert de Genlis. "We have a lot of respect for it. But there are so many things we could do that we couldn't wait for anyone else."

The same reverence that has ensured *Civilization's* place at the peak of 4X for decades is also its greatest restriction. While Sid Meier has made a point of passing custody of the series on, there's no getting around the fact that *Civ* has a formula Firaxis must adhere to. Amplitude is not bound by the same rules. "If they change a button somewhere, the players will go crazy," Von Knorring notes. "We have the chance of having that blank page."

Not for nothing is *Humankind's* logo a handprint. It's the studio's play to leave its mark on the genre it loves. "It's the reason we created Amplitude," says de Waubert de Genlis. "I would love it to be the game we're remembered for. That's why we're sending all our troops into battle, no reserves. It's all in." ■

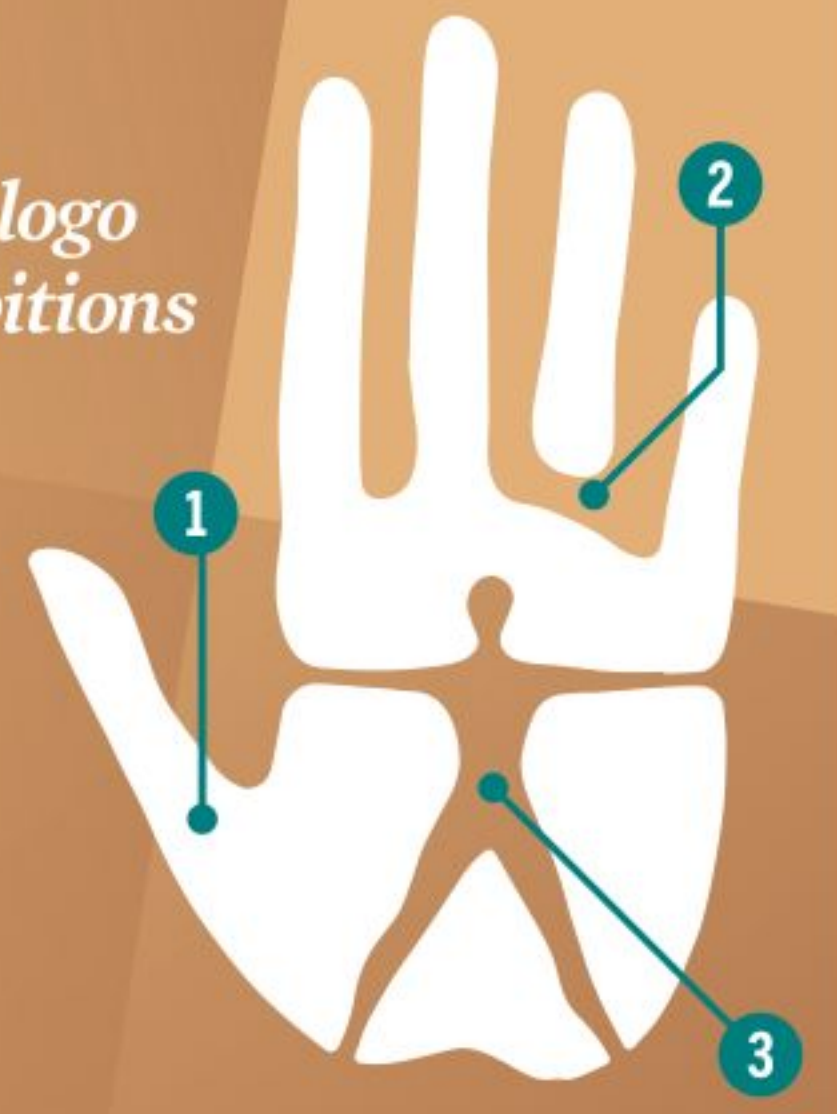
A BIG HAND

What *Humankind's* logo tells us about its ambitions

1 Digits are key to tracking our identity, one of *Humankind's* big themes.

2 This isn't a hand, it's a handprint – a way of leaving a mark.

3 Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, a symbol of humanity's connection to the planet.



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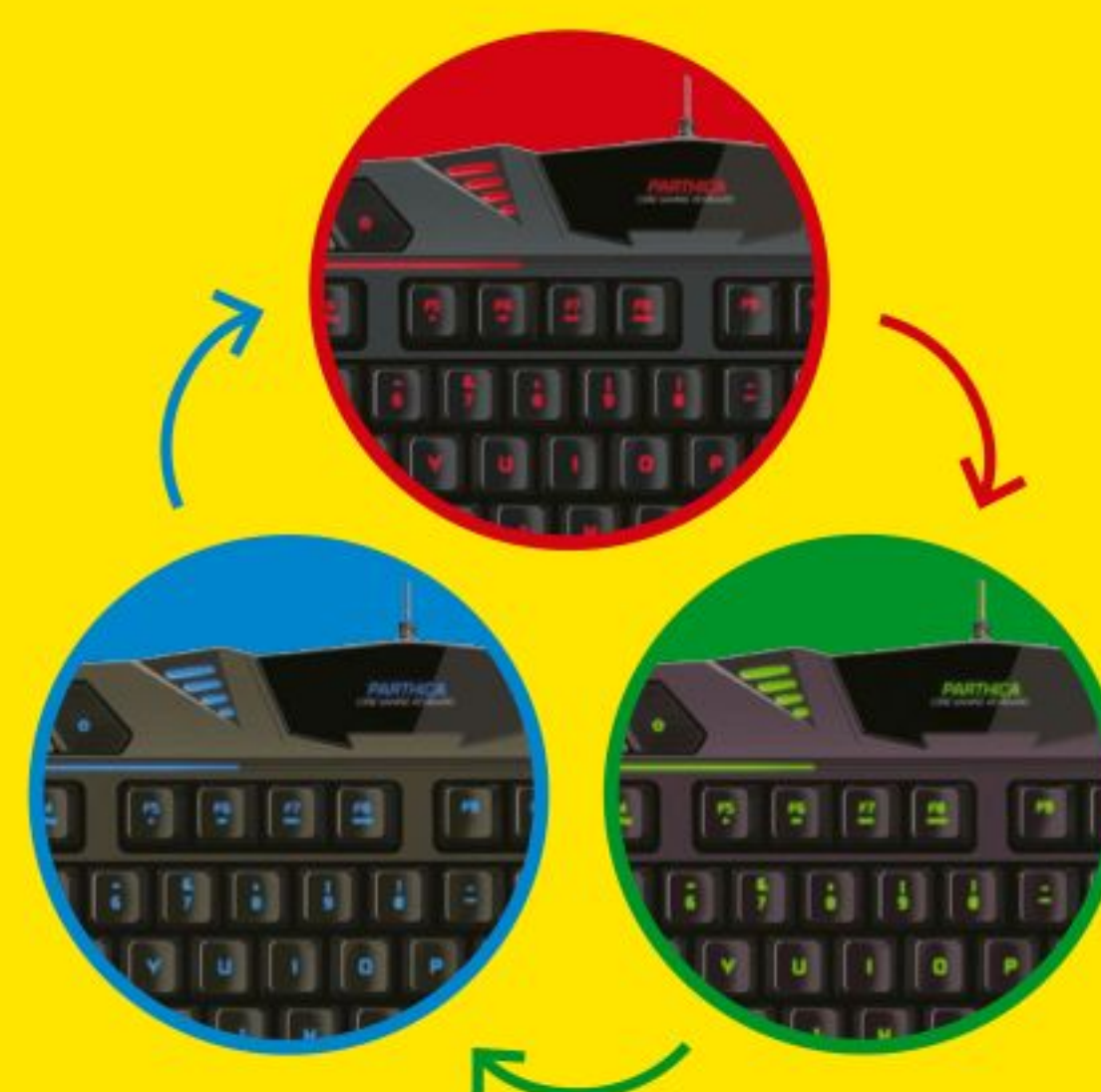
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give me

LIBERTY

The story behind
LIBERTY ISLAND, the
iconic first level of
DEUS EX.

By Andy Kelly

RTV

Liberty Island in *Deus Ex*

Since its release in the summer of 1999, *Deus Ex* has become one of the most beloved games on PC. Set in a bleak cyberpunk future, Ion Storm's ambitious first-person RPG, which was directed by Warren Spector, features deep systems, sprawling levels, emergent play, and a thrilling, conspiracy-laden plot. But one afternoon in Austin, Texas, where the game was developed, designer Harvey Smith and other members of the team were convinced that the game they'd been working on for years was destined for failure.

"We brought in Caroline Spector, Warren's wife, and she was the first person outside of the team to play it," says Smith. "She got off the boat at the dock and she picked up a box and threw it into the water. She got into the water and swam around. She tried to interact with a seagull. Then she tried to float on top of the crate."

It's worth noting that, in 1999, being able to manipulate physics objects like this in a realistic, simulated world was more of a novelty. And so this experimentation continued for 20 minutes as Harvey and the others watched over her shoulder, suddenly filled with dread. "We were gnashing our teeth," remembers Smith. "We were like 'God, we've fucking failed. She's not even starting the mission! She's just screwing around on the dock with all the stuff I put on there.'"

But then, suddenly, she turned to the anxious developers and told them in no uncertain terms that this was

the most fun she'd ever had playing a game. "We were like 'Holy shit! She enjoyed that?'. So we just doubled down on these quiet moments in the levels and the object physics. We already believed in these things ourselves, but it was very validating to hear it from someone else."

Liberty Island, where New York City's famous Statue of Liberty is perched, is the first level in *Deus Ex*. It's a trial by fire, thrusting newly minted anti-terror agent JC Denton into the middle of a terrorist occupation of the island. It's also the perfect introduction to *Deus Ex*'s unsurpassed freedom of play, with multiple ways to infiltrate the complex and deal with the terrorists holed up there.

"Warren had grown up in New York and he wanted to feature locations like Battery Park and Liberty Island," says Smith, who was behind much of the design of Liberty Island and other locations in *Deus Ex*. "And honestly, as a kid from Texas, I had no idea about these places and had never even visited them. But I still ended up inheriting a bunch of those maps, and it was Liberty Island that excited me the most because it was this big, open space."

"I'd seen corridors, streets, and alleys before in games. But what I really wanted to do was make a wide open space with something big in the middle that you could go left or right around. I could put tunnels under it, I could make it multi-tiered so you could climb to the top. That felt really different and exciting."

"When we shipped the game, Liberty Island ran at five frames per second on some machines. We'd see



the frame rate nosedive because we had too many characters and the sight lines were too long. But we were making these huge, open levels because that's the kind of game we wanted to make. A go anywhere game."

GOING UNDERGROUND

Once Denton has successfully dealt with the terrorist attack he returns to his headquarters for a debriefing – which, conveniently enough, is also located on Liberty Island. The underground UNATCO base, one of *Deus Ex*'s most memorable locations, is stuffed with characters to meet, secrets to discover, and world-building to ingest. But,

TOP: The famous torch, now stored inside the secure statue complex.

ABOVE: The severed head hammers home the bleakness of the dystopian future.



FUTURE SHOCK *Key events leading up to Deus Ex*


2007

Entrepreneur David Sarif turns a Detroit car plant into a factory specialising in mechanical augmentations.


2020

Majestic 12 scientists, including *Deus Ex*'s Bob Page, begins developing nano-augmentations.


2023

Paul Denton is cloned and used as a test subject for MJ12's secret nano-augmentation project.


2027

Adam Jensen survives a terrorist attack and uncovers a conspiracy, as seen in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.


2050

Paul Denton is the first human to integrate with nano, rather than mechanical, augmentations.


2051

The Statue of Liberty is destroyed in a bombing. UNATCO accuses French terrorist group Silhouette.


2052

JC Denton arrives on Liberty Island to deal with a terrorist attack, setting the events of *Deus Ex* in motion.

Smith reveals, the game wasn't always structured this way.

"The original idea was that you turn up for your first day of work, get briefed, and meet your colleagues," says Smith. The first *Ultima Underworld*, one of Smith's favourite games, begins with the player in a hostile environment. The sequel, which he found wildly disappointing, starts with you hanging out in a castle chatting to people. "So rather than open *Deus Ex* with Denton turning up at the office, we started with the mission instead.

"It was one of those epiphanies that comes mid-stream. By reversing this one thing, it changed everything. What if the terrorist attack was happening on your first day at work? It's completely ludicrous and implausible, of course. But nonetheless, it was fun. You

were immediately solving problems and doing shit."

This way, getting into UNATCO – the entrance to which is tantalisingly locked when you first encounter it – is a reward for completing the mission. "It also gave us the chance to reflect on how you played," says Smith. "Which direction you took, what objectives you completed, who you met, and whether you behaved ethically."

An example of this is killing the unarmed terrorist leader you find at the top of the statue – do so and you'll be harshly reprimanded. On the other hand, if you knock the terrorists out rather than kill them you'll be commended for it. By some characters, anyway – the UNATCO grunts are not impressed by your pacifist methodology. This kind of granular reactivity

defines *Deus Ex*, and was made possible by the limitations of the technology the game was built on.

"Because the fidelity was so low, this wasn't that hard to do," says Smith. "That's the problem with games now – the fidelity is so high that to support something you have to do it well. That's a lot of work, which means you can only support so many things. But in *Deus Ex* we could just throw you a datalink or have some guy flapping his muppet mouth at you. We actually had this simple tech that would analyse audio files so NPCs' mouths kinda matched what was being said.

"We could also change the text in an email at the last minute or even easily re-record a line of dialogue

“LIBERTY ISLAND RAN AT FIVE FRAMES PER SECOND”

LADY LIBERTY *An overview of the island*

1 UNATCO HQ

The entrance to the underground headquarters of UNATCO. When you've dealt with the attack on the surface you'll return here for a debriefing.

2 MAIN ENTRANCE

This leads into the statue complex. If you want to rescue fellow UNATCO agent Gunther Hermann you'll have to infiltrate it. Luckily there are several ways in.

3 NORTH DOCK

Here you'll find Harley Filben, a UNATCO informant who will hand over the keys to the statue complex. You'll have to deal with a couple of armed guards first.

4 SHIP

The sunken wreck of an old freighter. Break the cargo hold open with a crowbar and you'll find some gear, including a shotgun. Don't run out of breath though.



5 STATUE OF LIBERTY

This iconic landmark was partially destroyed in a terrorist bombing a year before the events of *Deus Ex*. Or at least that's what the public was led to believe.

6 HEAD

And here's the statue's severed head, which has been turned into a memorial to those killed in the bombing. It's one of the defining images of the game.

7 BUNKER

An underground utility bunker containing an early example of an environmental puzzle: a broken generator crackling with arcs of electricity.

8 SOUTH DOCK

This is where Denton arrives on Liberty Island and meets his brother. Do you take the GEP gun, the crossbow, or the sniper rifle? It's the first of many decisions.

because the guy who voiced JC [Jay Anthony Franke] worked in Dallas at Ion Storm. We tried to do the same in *Dishonored*, to account for everything a player would do, but it was much heavier lifting in that game.”

Liberty Island is a difficult level, especially if it's your first time playing the game. If *Deus Ex* was made today it would likely be laden with tutorials, pop-up hints, and other hand-holding. “It's almost like a test,” says Smith. “All the systems are in place in that level. But we did backtrack and add some things to ease you in.” This

included JC's brother, Paul Denton, meeting you on the south dock and offering you a selection of weapons to suit different play styles.

“I've always said that if you make your game super streamlined then you try to add depth later, that's a hard road to walk,” says Smith.

“But if you make it as deep, emergent, and layered as possible, but then you figure out how to ease people into that, the end result is much better. Liberty Island was us testing that theory.”

But making design decisions like this was never easy at Ion Storm. Although Smith enjoyed working there, things were often made

difficult by conflicting opinions about what *Deus Ex* should be. “The team was a weird combination of tech nerds and pen-and-paper nerds coming together,” he says.

“A more narrow slice of society than we have in game dev now. The industry is definitely more interesting and a lot more diverse now. That said, I loved Ion Storm, and I learned a lot from every single person I worked with there. But there was a schism. Three different factions were at odds, and that often involved trying to convince Warren that we were making one kind of game and not another. One part of the team, some of whom had come from shooter backgrounds, wanted to make an FPS like *GoldenEye*. Another group came from Origin and wanted

“THREE
DIFFERENT
FACTIONS WERE
AT ODDS”

Liberty Island in *Deus Ex*

to make an Origin-style role-playing game, but from a first-person perspective. Another was in love with Looking Glass, specifically *Ultima Underworld* and *System Shock*.”

This led to fights and compromises. One team would feel bad that they lost, another would be delighted that their values won out, and vice versa. “Some of us wanted the speed, movement, and precision of a modern first-person shooter,” says Smith. “Others wanted the world-building and atmosphere of a Looking Glass game. Then, over time, these elements began to overlap.”

FREE REIN

Liberty Island was a source of conflict, particularly when it came to determining how much freedom the player should be afforded at this early stage of the game. “We had people on the team who thought the first level should be about using one set of powers, then the next should be about another set,” says Smith. “A lot of classic games are structured like that, but another group of us thought that everything in *Deus Ex* should be possible all the time. It should be your decisions as a player that drive you, not the game itself.”

Some people also thought that each style of play should be clearly delineated: a branching hallway, for instance, would lead to a stealth path and a combat path. “But we thought there should be the potential for stealth and combat in each hallway,” says Smith. “If you do that wrong it gets messy and doesn’t have any identity. But we developed rules

about encounter spaces, like having a negative space between them to give the player contrast. That’s why there are empty areas on Liberty Island, to give you quiet, reflective moments.”

About halfway through the development of *Deus Ex* it was decided that every level should support stealth, combat, and hacking. “You can have other stuff too, like maybe a bribery path,” says Smith. “Giving a guard some money to turn the other way, something like that. But overall those three styles had to be fluidly supported.

“One thing that really helped us, and I don’t think this gets enough attention, is that during the development of *Deus Ex*, *System Shock 2*, one of the *Thief* games, and *Half-Life* came out,” adds Smith. “So we had the opportunity to play these games and take things away from them. That really helped *Deus Ex*.”

While *Deus Ex* was a team effort created by many talented people, the nature of game development at the turn of the millennium meant that Smith was able to get much more hands-on than he can today, even down to designing individual props for the levels. “To get anything into a game these days, even a chair, you need a massive army of people, sometimes using external dev partners,” he says. “So everything has to be super documented and thought about. It goes out, it comes

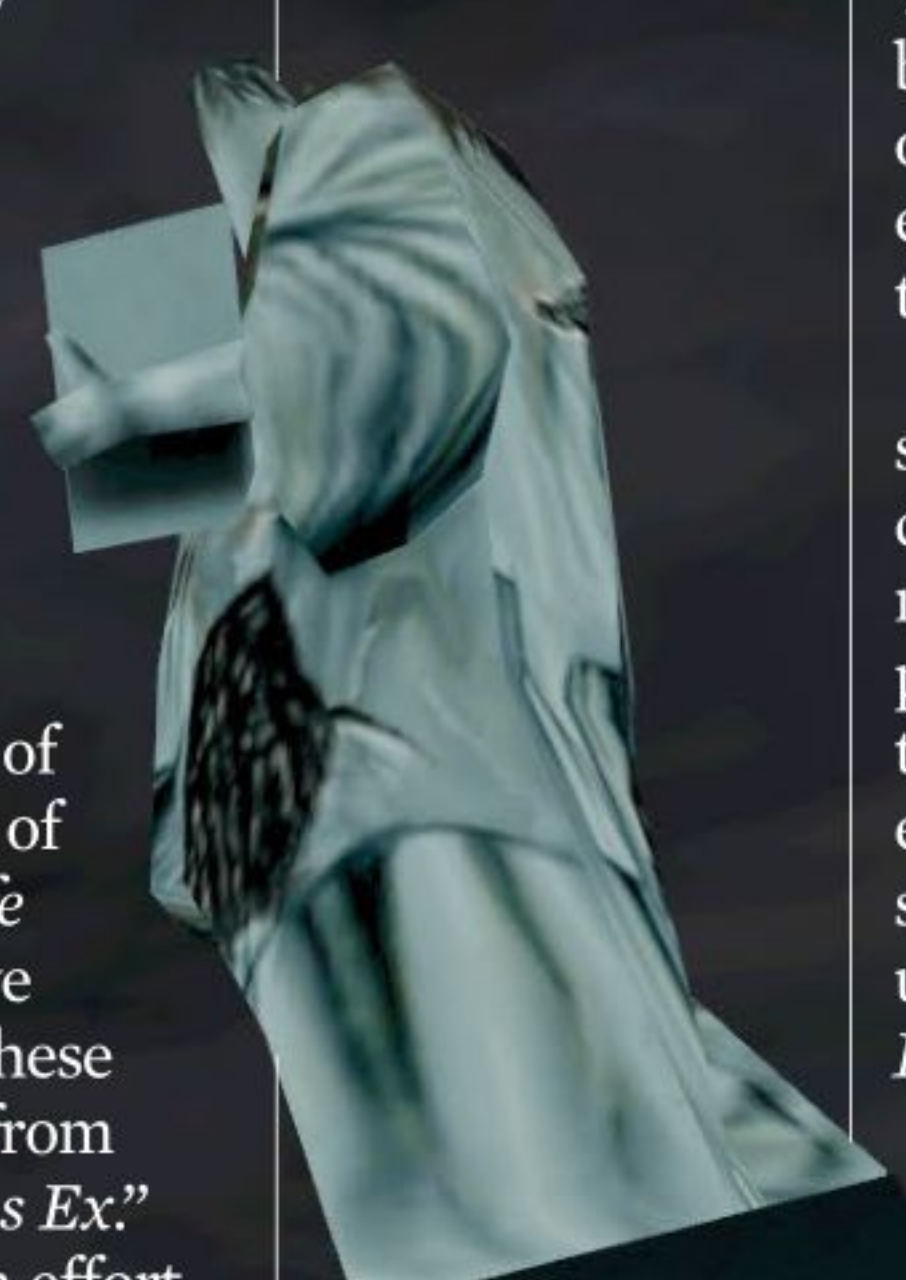
back, you make adjustments. It’s a huge undertaking.

“But when we were making *Deus Ex* I spent one day in Unreal vertex-manipulating various pieces of furniture. I made tables, chairs, beds, everything. Then I made a separate level on the network that was just called ‘furniture’ or whatever, and it was full of them for people to use. This isn’t a humble brag. It’s just that, back then, one person could jam out of a lot of stuff. Now we have an environment team, an architecture team, and a level design team.”

Almost 20 years later, people are still playing *Deus Ex*, evidence of the depth and quality of its design, not to mention the talent and vision of the people who designed it. It’s amazing that from such a conflicted studio emerged a game that has so firmly stood the test of time. It may look uglier with every passing year, but *Deus Ex* remains an eminently

playable game. Liberty Island is one of the greatest opening gambits in PC gaming and the lessons

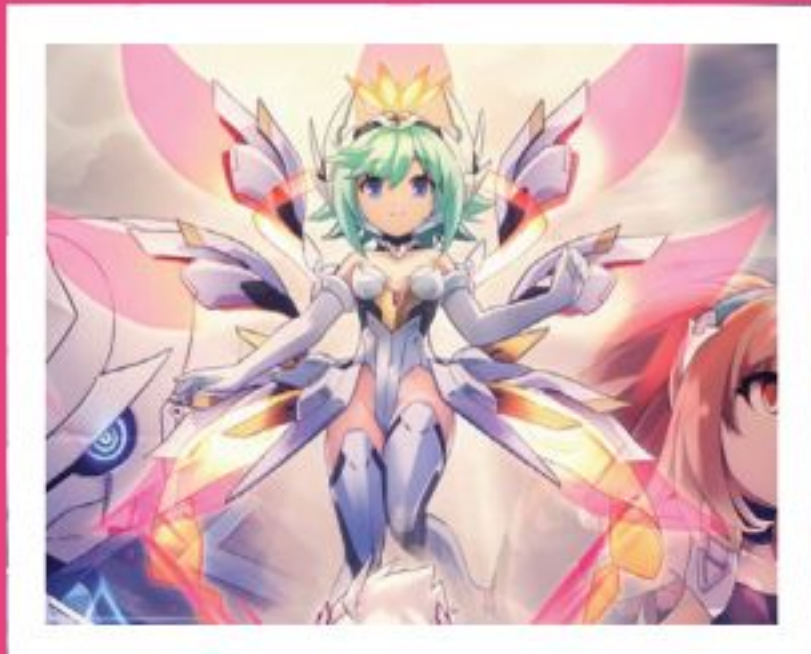
Smith learned making it have served him well over the years, notably in the wonderful *Dishonored* series, which he directed. “Along with *Dishonored*,” he says. “*Deus Ex* is one of the few times in my career where I’ve just non-stop played a game I’ve been working on and it hasn’t felt like a chore.” ■



FAR LEFT: Follow the sound of the chopper to find the entrance to UNATCO’s base.

LEFT: This informant has the keys to the front door of the statue complex.

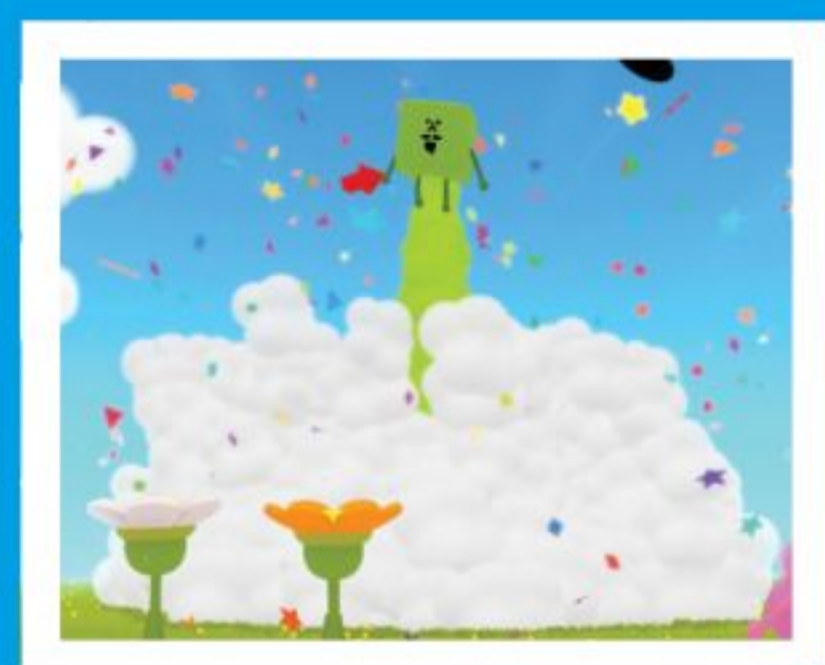
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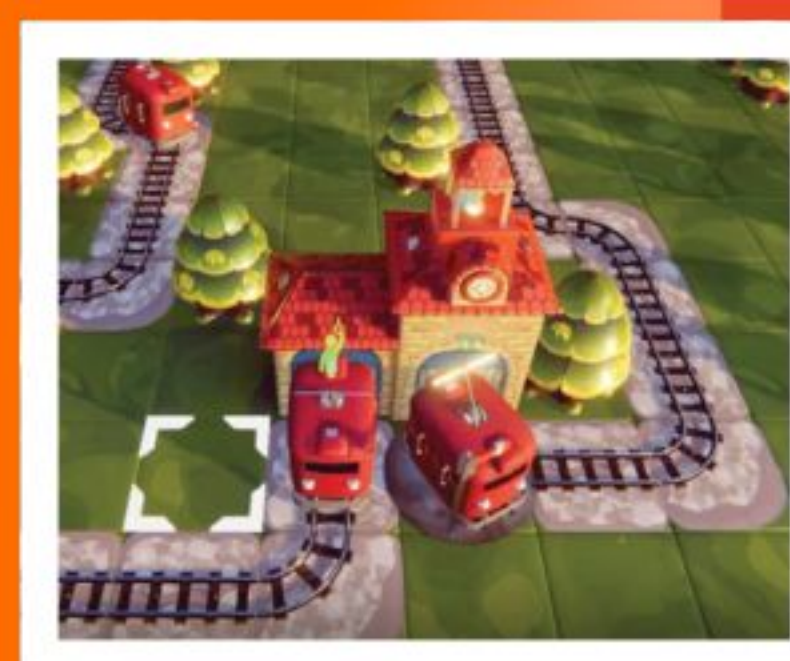
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Seven days in Japan.

One indie festival.

Five stories about **JAPANESE PC GAMING** in 2019, where it's going next, and why our salvation lies with a dancing poop.

By Wes Fenlon



52 THE MIZUGUCHI EFFECT



The Mizuguchi Effect

First stop: **ENHANCE GAMES**, to talk **TETRIS EFFECT** and sit in a chair made of speakers.



It's the hottest day of the year in Tokyo, and Tetsuya Mizuguchi is wearing shorts. The creator of *Rez* and *Lumines* has an office for Enhance Games in trendy Shibuya, the full-body *Rez* VR synesthesia suit standing just inside the door like the world's most intense mannequin. The office suits him – the room is a hodgepodge of half a dozen desks as casual as he is now, but an unassuming wall panel opens up like an I-shit-you-not secret door to a couple more rooms. One of them is dedicated to The Chair.

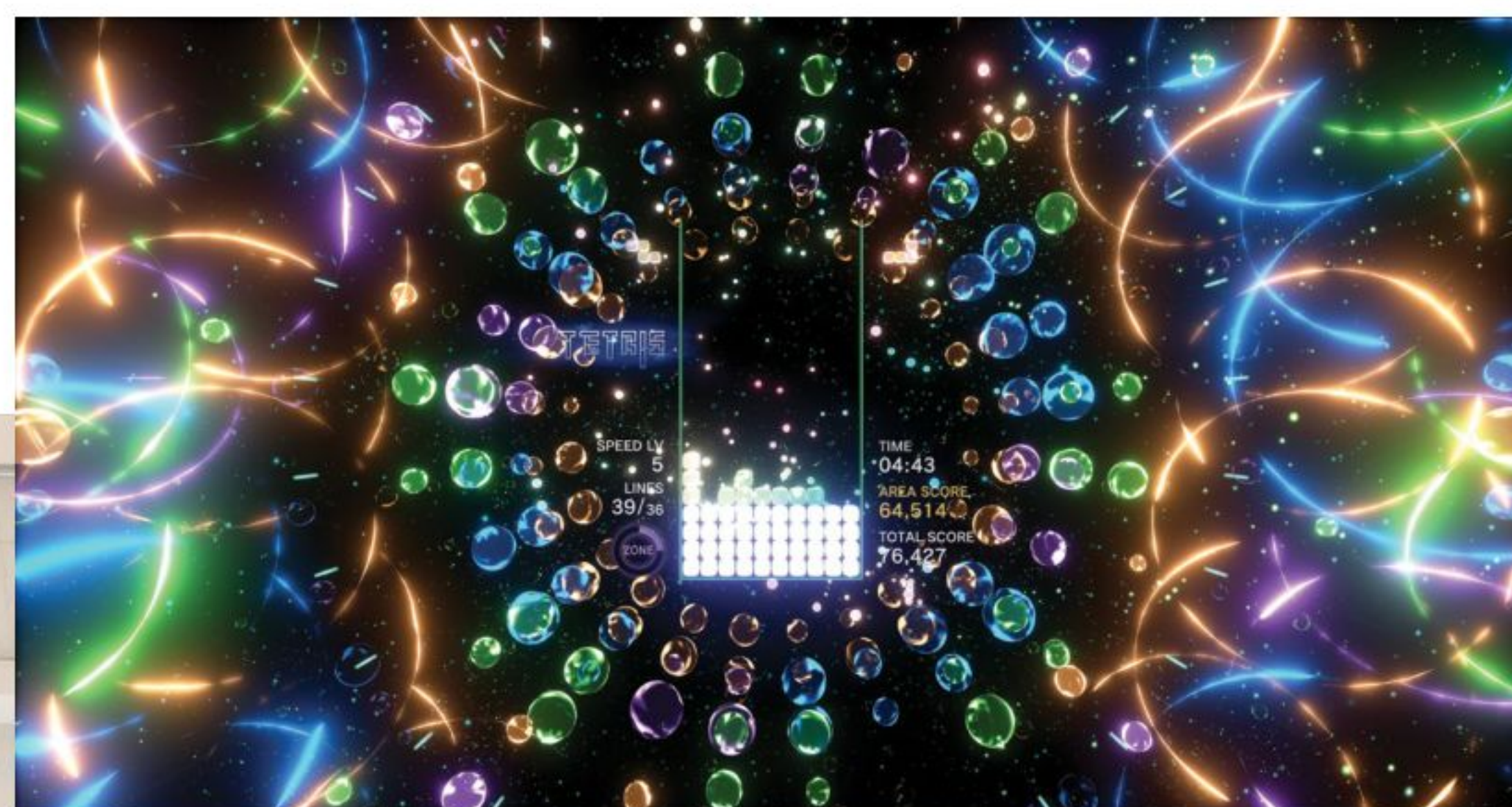
I've just pounded two bottles of cold green tea, one to stave off jetlag and the second to restore some of the fluid I've sweat out in the summer heat, when Enhance Games' Mark MacDonald tells me I've got to try The Chair. I'm here to see *Tetris Effect* on PC, but who can pass up the opportunity to experience something that sounds like a medieval torture device?

The Chair, it turns out, is Mizuguchi's latest experiment with synesthesia, a delicately arranged collection of 44 subwoofers that you lie on, while two speakers pointed at your head produce music and sound. The subwoofers vibrate along in a pattern meant to evoke something as you lie there in the dark.

Tension, relaxation, caffeine-fueled excitement, different feelings as it runs through a complex sequence of sounds and vibrations. Towards the end as the sound crescendos my brain starts conjuring up imaginary action scenes that make me ask Mizuguchi whether he plans to add a visual component. It could be an incredible VR experience, but my mind was already doing a good job of filling in the gaps.

"Right now it's just sound, and we have a lot of people who come in who feel like they're not missing anything," says Mizuguchi. "But I really want to make the answer for that, which is something that once you see it, you're like 'oh my god. I can't imagine that this was just sound'."

With *Tetris Effect*, Mizuguchi paired his interest in synesthesia with a more traditional game. You play it with a controller, on a TV or on a VR headset, much like *Rez* or *Lumines*. But he says his interests looking forward are in

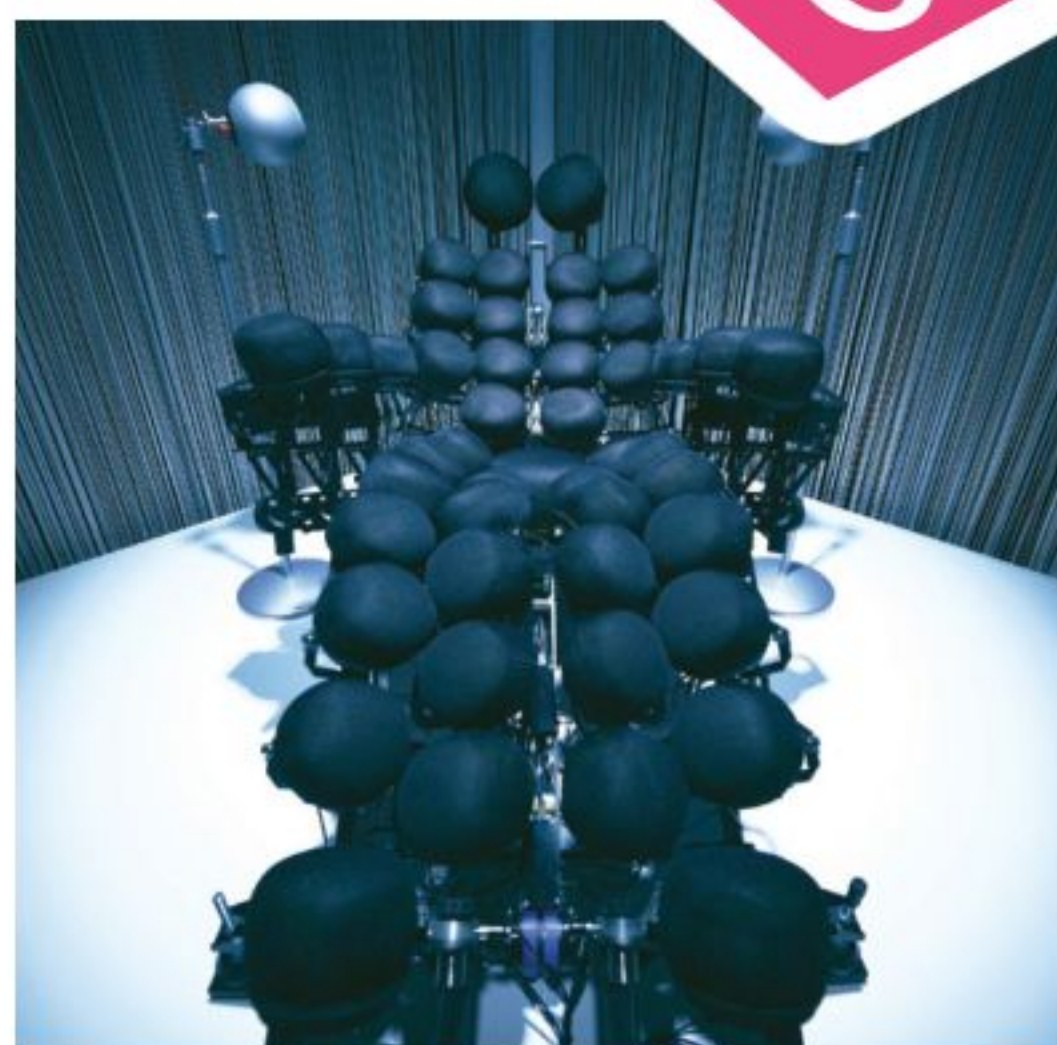
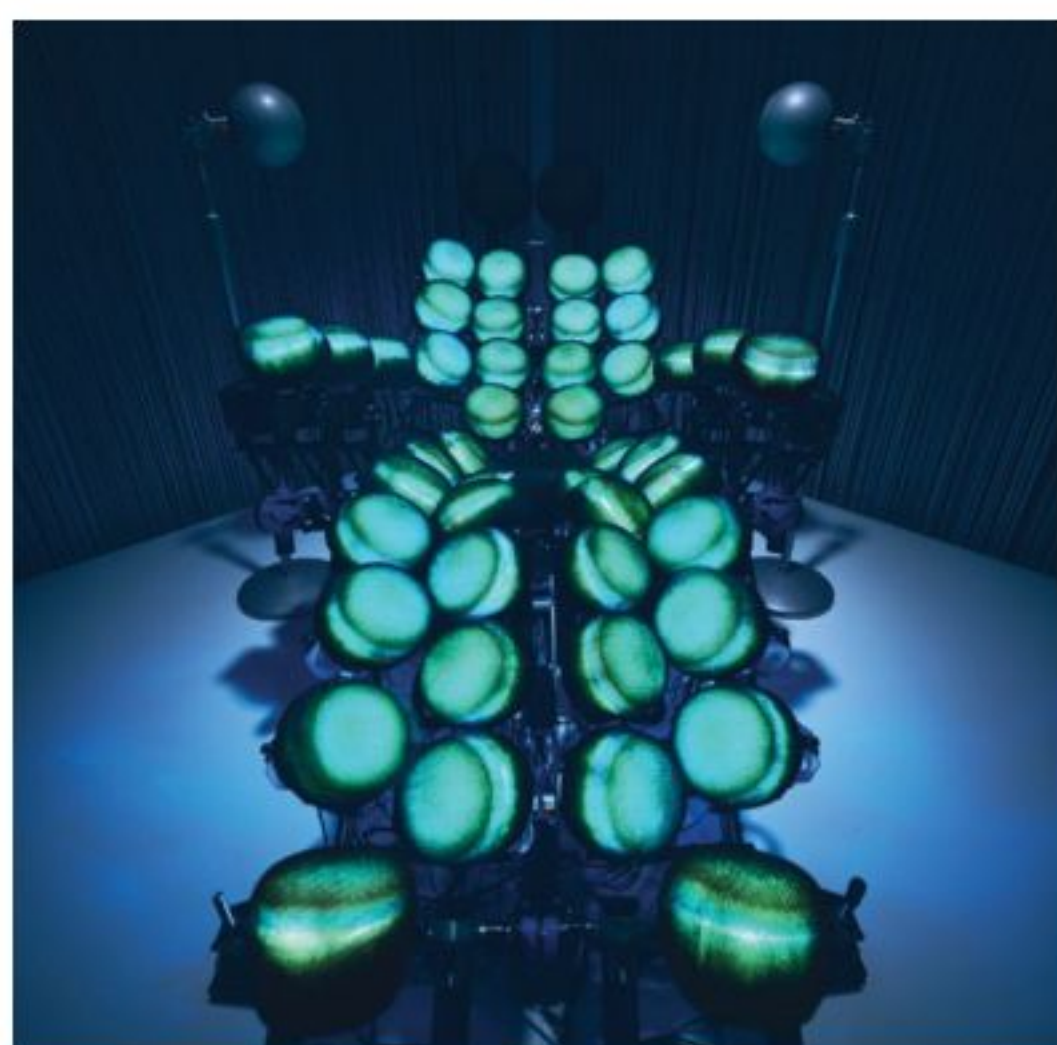


ABOVE: *Tetris Effect* on PC has expanded graphics options.

LEFT: Enhance Games' office feels almost like a lab.



**"IT ACTUALLY
ADDS TO THE
OVERALL EMOTION"**



they can turn with more power go a long way: uncapped resolution and framerate, and most importantly more shifting and dancing clusters of light, which transform *Tetris* into something more profound.

"Saying 'more particles!' is normally like 'so what, who cares?'" Mizuguchi says.

"But in this game, because the particles are reacting to the music and what you're doing, it actually adds to the overall emotion. It's not just a visual thing like 'oh that looks better'. When I play it, that's

something that I notice immediately. It's more particles, but what that ends up resulting in is a greater feeling while you're playing it."

Mizuguchi says he sees *Tetris Effect* as a "proof of concept" that they were able to use technology to change how we perceive a game akin to a "common language".

"What I think we were able to do with *Tetris Effect* is that, without changing too many of the fundamental gameplay mechanics, we were able to make this kind of new experience. So it is an interesting thought: could this be transferred to other things?

"[Could we] similarly transform them into something new or exciting or more emotionally resonating? So yeah, whether or not we will do that, or that will come to pass, I can't really say. But it's definitely something that is possible. Something we think about." ■

ABOVE: Would you like an emotional back massage?

LEFT: It looks like a torture device, but is quite comfortable.

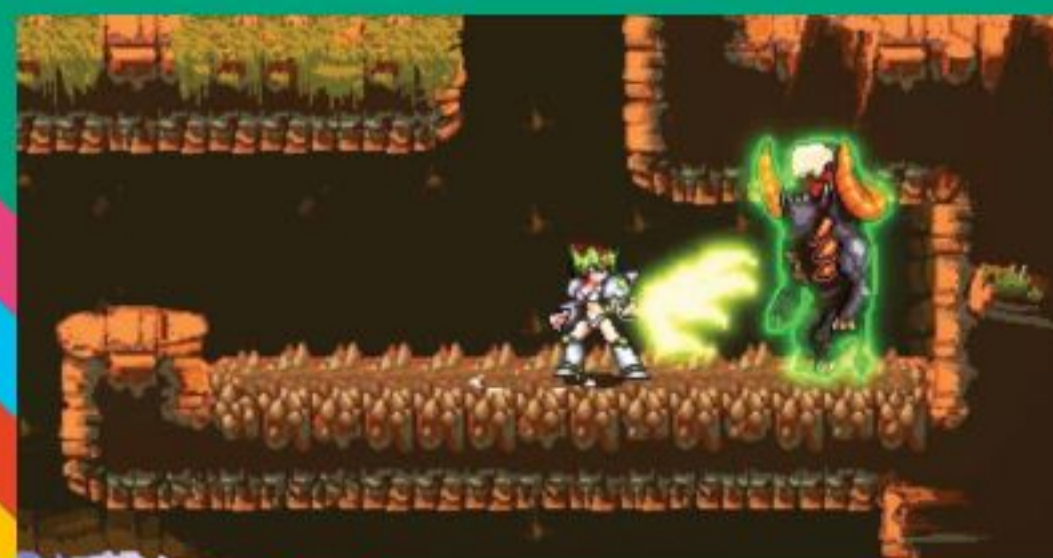
augmented reality and mixed reality, real physical interactions that can be changed or heightened.

MacDonald points out this isn't exactly new for Miz, though – when he first joined Sega in the 90s he worked on the arcade game *Sega Rally Special Stage*, which put players in an actual Toyota on pneumatics that simulated motion. "He was always trying to push the physical, engaging your other senses. I see that as a real throughline of his career," he says.

MORE THAN PARTICLES

However ambitious Mizuguchi's experiments get, I don't think we've seen the last of his games on PC. The PC version of *Tetris Effect* is easily the definitive one, especially if you can play it on a high fidelity headset like the new Rift, Vive Pro, or Valve Index. All the little knobs

GAMES I PLAYED AT BITSUMMIT



SMELTER

Part Super Nintendo-era platformer, part... real-time strategy game? *Smelter* puts a cool twist on *Mega Man X*, giving you three forms to switch between with different abilities while platforming, and an RTS layer for unlocking new abilities.



Train to Paradise

In the heart of Nintendo country, **KYOTO**'s beauty draws in western indie devs to plant their flag.



few hours on the Shinkansen from Tokyo and you've left behind a city of 14 million people and the bulk of Japan's big game studios. But what Kyoto lacks in size it makes up for in heart and history.

This is the home of Nintendo, neighbour of Capcom's Osaka, and the capital of Japan for a thousand years. Take a 20-minute stroll from Nintendo's headquarters and you'll be at the foot of the Fushimi Inari shrine, built about 500 years ago.

History lives comfortably side-by-side with modern business, and the utterly relaxed, contemplative atmosphere that it gives Kyoto is probably why it's home to Japan's most prominent indie studios founded by foreigners. Once you're there, it's simply hard to leave.

"Greatest city in the world," says Mark Lentz, who does PR and sound design for Q-Games, makers of the *PixelJunk* series. The studio, founded by former *Star Fox* programmer Dylan Cuthbert, has been in Kyoto for nearly 20 years. The younger 17-Bit, founded by Sega veteran Jake Kazdal, has only been in Kyoto since 2014, but they've found their home. Literally – the studio is set up in a sun-soaked house on a quiet residential street, which takes me past gaggles of seven-year-olds walking home from school in adorable hats and uniforms.

"Having access to all of the amazing natural beauty around here has been super inspiring," says Kazdal. 17-Bit's next game, after 2015's underrated roguelike *Galak-Z*, is still under wraps, but Kazdal will tell me it's set in the woods and built in Unreal Engine 4.

"I spend a lot of time hiking and camping. The nature here is just phenomenal," he says. "It's super weird and dense. All kinds of weird plants, interesting rock formations, a lot of canyons and valleys. Constant visual stimulus, I think, is huge."

SPOTLIGHT ON KYOTO

17-Bit, like the other indie studios in Japan, is mostly made up of American and British developers who've moved to Kyoto and settled. He says that thanks to events like Bitsummit, which puts the spotlight on Kyoto every summer, Japanese indies are starting to pop up more, but they still lag behind the west. Most Japanese developers still get a job at a company and stay there for decades, and

TOP: Tinker Trains evokes the physicality of models.



PLAY DOG PLAY TAG

This has to be the silliest game I played at Bitsummit. You control a rambunctious dog and hurl the ragdoll human at the other end of your leash like a weapon. It's the kind of party game that would definitely make it worth having a PC in the living room.



SHORES UNKNOWN

An ambitious western RPG from a Russian developer living in Japan. It's using a low-poly style that is now in vogue. Animations and the UI are rough, but it looks to have a heavily branching story based on your choices. Could be a sleeper hit in 2020.

MIZUGUCHI EFFECT

PARADISE TRAIN

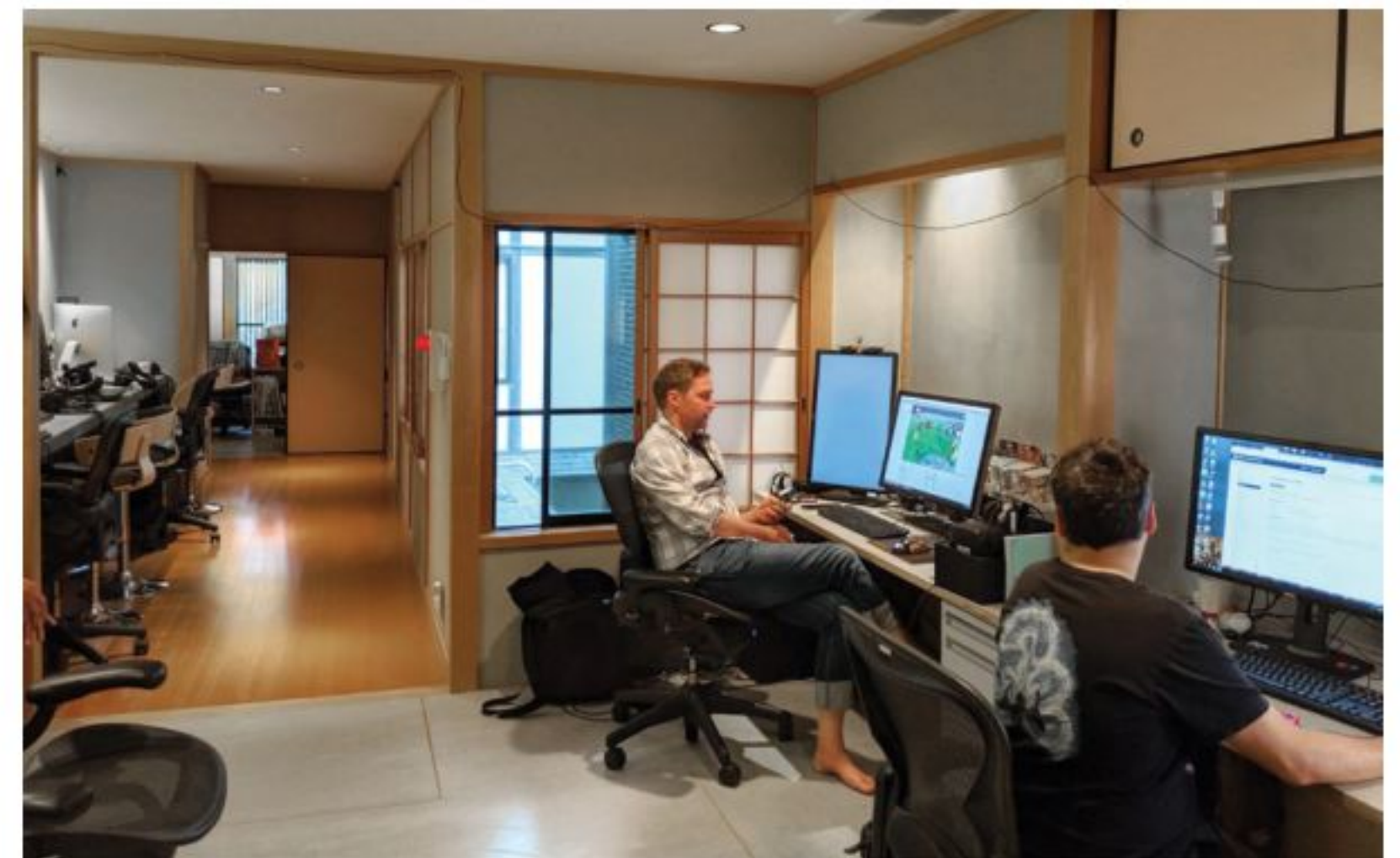
BITSUMMIT

PC PROMISES

LOVE & POOP

RIGHT: Giles Goddard shows off VR snowboarding.

BELOW: 17-Bit head Jake Kazdal with his gaming ephemera.



few have applied for jobs at 17-Bit. “This is something that’s stumped me since I got here,” he says. “Japan has a huge history of entrepreneur-style restaurants and bars and little shops. Boutiques, bistros. Banks fund that sort of thing. That kind of entrepreneurship is prevalent everywhere. For some reason that doesn’t bleed into the tech. At all. Everything tech here is just giant corporations. I can’t figure out why. I don’t really understand. But I guess the systems have just sort of grown up around that, and that’s just the way things are.”

Kazdal is a rabid VR player, so he sends me across town to Vitei Backroom, where Giles Goddard, who programmed beloved Nintendo 64 games like *1080 Snowboarding* and *Mario 64*, is tinkering with a VR

snowboarding successor. Rift and Vive controllers are strewn around the office like candy.

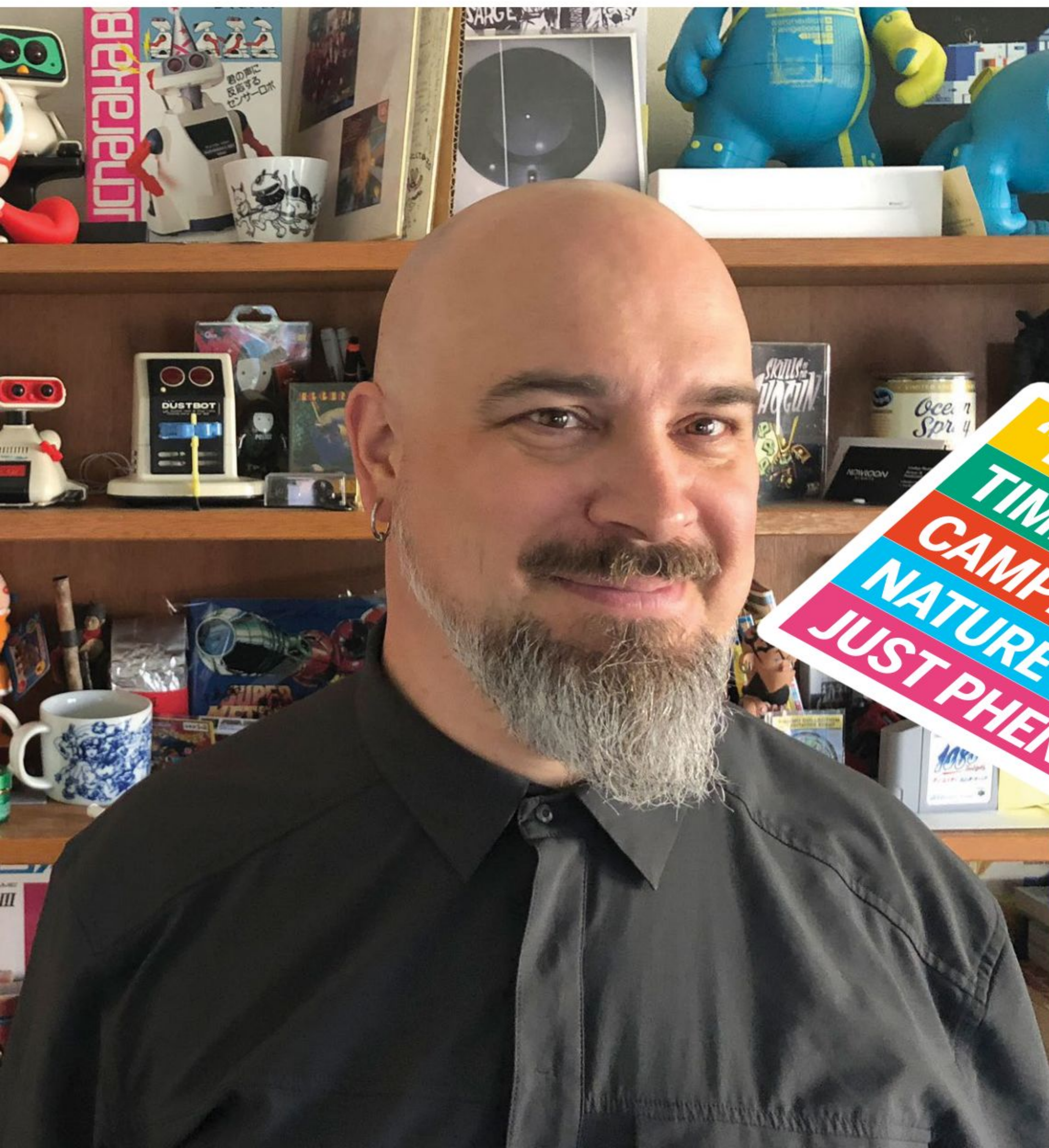
It’s mostly empty at 4pm on a Friday, but a couple of Vitei’s developers are racing to finish a new prototype before Bitsummit kicks off on Saturday.

It’s a cute, chunky toy train sandbox called *Tinker Trains*, where you place tracks, roads, and other parts on a map in tiles and then watch your little red train cars trundle happily along.

It looks like a real toy set, and there’s a great physicality to it. Designer Peter Traylor uses a pair of Nintendo Switch joy-cons connected to his PC to pick up the blocks and rotate them with motion controls.

There’s a piece of track with a balloon on it, for example, that has a dial on the bottom to adjust its power. Turn your wrist and a screwdriver will flick between the notches, powering up the balloon to launch a train over a line of trees.

Goddard’s own pet project is a multiplayer VR snowboarding game, a shared mountain for dozens of boarders to carve down in real time. For now, both games are just prototypes. That’s life at an experimental indie dev. If they can find a publisher interested in funding them, the games will get made. Otherwise, it’s onto the next idea. ■



“I SPEND A LOT OF TIME HIKING AND CAMPING. THE NATURE HERE IS JUST PHENOMENAL”

Reach the Summit

Two days at the festival that's paving the way for **INDIE GAMING** in Japan.



he walk to Kyoto's Miyako Messe convention centre from Kiyamachi street, home to a thousand bars and restaurants packed into a few blocks, takes me over the river that bisects Kyoto, where in the morning cyclists pedal along a serene shaded path, and in the evening hundreds of game developers will gather with six-packs of beer from 7-Eleven to talk about Bitsummit. It's a gaming event not quite like any other I've been to. It has an energetic but laid-back vibe even now in its seventh year, as it's grown large enough to draw Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft into the same compact convention hall. But indies are still very much the stars, and they've come from all over to show off their games and make a splash they might not be able to at a bigger event like E3.

"In the beginning, it was much smaller scale. Almost like an indie meetup," says Kazutoshi Iida, who once made genre-defying games like *Doshin the Giant* and is now a game design professor. "Some people didn't even have games to display, just ideas printed on paper, and they'd just talk about the ideas, talk about the games they want to make."

The show's too big for that now, but the spirit remains in developers who splinter off at night, searching Kiyamachi for the perfect microbar to talk about making games in. Someone tells me that Bitsummit is the only event where you'll see Japanese industry icons just hanging out, and they're right. Over the weekend I spot *Deadly Premonition* developer Hidetaka 'Swery' Suehiro by his booth, action game hero Hideki Kamiya with his Platinum crew, and talk to Koji Igarashi about *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*. I regret to inform you that he does not pull off the cowboy hat.

Bitsummit is still a small convention, but the variety of cool indie games is overwhelming. There's a row of Japanese 'doujin' fangames, a row of games from China's fast-growing indie scene, a smattering of student games, and just cool, weird stuff everywhere you look. Japan-based indie publisher Dangen Entertainment has one of the show's biggest booths, and is showing off platformers and adventure games and more good stuff than I have time to play, like the 2018 action-RPG hit *CrossCode*.

DEVELOPER DIVERSITY

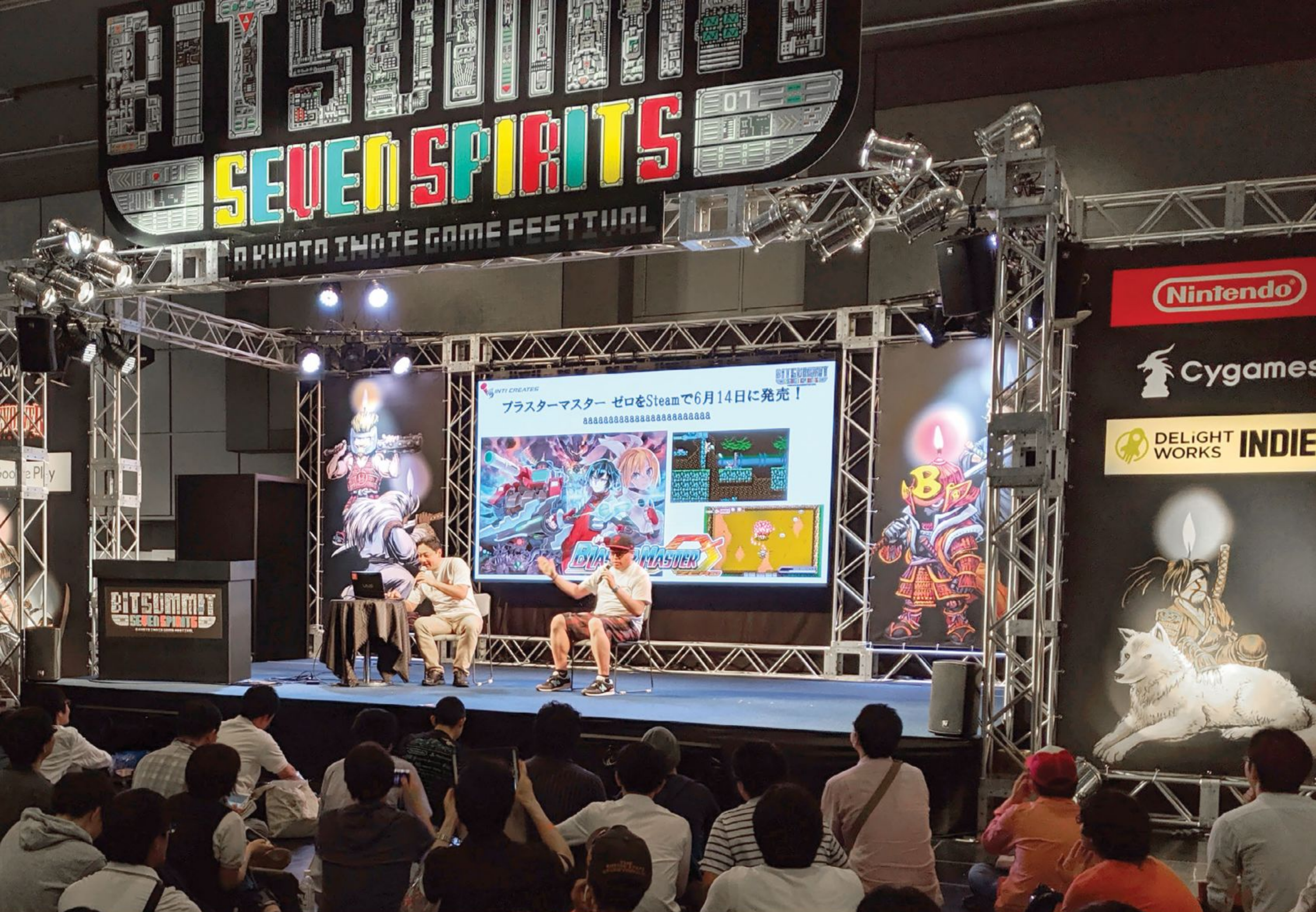
One I do play is *Smelter*, a bizarre but cool hybrid of *Mega Man X* platformer and real-time strategy, from a small team of foreign developers based in Osaka. "We have members from Indonesia, Spain, Germany, Iran and the US so it's quite the combination," says developer Brian Otten. "Although our company is pretty much 95 percent Japanese, the development team is composed completely of foreign devs. We're a really new addition to our company and still small with only five members."

The hard truth is many of these games at Bitsummit aren't polished enough, or flashy enough, to break out and succeed on Steam. But Darin Ito, who works for publisher Degica in Tokyo, argues that showing a game at an event like Bitsummit doesn't have to accomplish that to be worthwhile. "Developers can meet other developers or



"IN THE BEGINNING,
IT WAS MUCH
SMALLER SCALE.
ALMOST LIKE
AN INDIE MEETUP"





ABOVE: Announcing *Blaster Master Zero*'s PC release.

LEFT: Kazutoshi Iida has attended the show since it began.

FAR RIGHT: Demos include the sequel to an RPG from 1983.

publishers, or just get advice on how to self-publish. Quality is going up," he says.

Degica not only publishes games, but actually serves as a payment processor for online retailers. Without it, the PC's small but growing Japanese audience may not exist today. "One thing I've been noticing is a lot more western titles are getting Japanese translations quicker," Ito says. "There are more Japanese users buying things on Steam itself. Degica actually handles the payment system for Steam in Japan. You can buy Steam cards at the convenience store, which is a huge help for people, because a lot of people still don't use credit cards here. It just makes it a lot easier to buy games."

As Bitsummit grows, it runs the risk of losing some of the intimate feel that defines it. At midnight on the river I find Kazdal in the crowd. "This is crazy," he says, looking around at how many people have turned out.

I get the sense that this is a far cry from the exclusive club that was the river party of three years ago, and it's easy to picture Bitsummit three years from now, bigger and more formal, some of its magic lost. But that would also mean that its mission to fuel indie development in Japan was a success. And even if it grows into something a little bigger, a little more buttoned-up, it's still in Kyoto. The city has magic to spare. ■



NO STRAIGHT ROADS

It's a battle between rock and EDM in this music-themed action game. I enjoyed the idea and the aesthetic more than the one fairly traditional boss fight I got to play, but it's promising, and rad to see an indie game from Malaysia making waves.



COFFEE TALK

This is *VA-11 HALL-A*, but in a coffee shop. The demo does a good job of setting a lo-fi tone, but the writing is bland. A developer tells me it's written in multiple languages, with no edits from a native yet, so hopefully that gives it a major upgrade before release.



“ONE OF THE BIG THINGS
FOR US ... WAS BEING
ABLE TO EASILY, WITH
STEAM, REACH A
WORLDWIDE AUDIENCE”



ASTALON

A cute NES-era platformer that has you switching between three different characters to overcome different obstacles in a castle. Like developer Matt Kap's previous game *Castle in the Darkness*, it seems tightly designed and challenging.



WORLD OF HORROR

An evocative black and white RPG-roguelike that channels the aesthetic of Junji Ito's horror manga. The aesthetic is dynamite, but the interface is confusing, particularly in combat. I guess not knowing what's going on is appropriate for Eldritch horror.

PC Promises

INTI CREATES and the mind behind **LA-MULANA** talk about Steam in 2019



Inti Creates may be the largest developer in Japan I'd call indie, at just shy of 100 people. It helps that their games look indie, with deliberately throwback pixel art and a devotion to old Japanese platformers like *Mega Man*. Hell, they made the *Mega Man Zero* games on the Game Boy Advance in the early 2000s, and today they have a strong lineup of 2D action games. More Japanese developers are finally bringing those sorts of games to PC, and I talked to Inti president Takuya Aizu at Bitsummit about the slow growth of the PC indie scene there.

When Inti Creates first started putting its games on Steam in 2015, there was a market for them in Japan, but a small one. They were mostly players in the 'doujin' community, who played fan games sold at Japanese comic markets. "A lot of the indie games, the doujin games of old, they're very niche and have that core playerbase. Maybe not that big, but it's still there," Aizu says. "Even if the numbers weren't gigantic on Steam, there was still that small core of customers who were there and we wanted to make ourselves available to them in some way. One of the big things for us as an independent developer was being able to easily, with Steam, reach a worldwide audience. That was a huge part of what made Steam so appealing."

Aizu says that he thinks Steam started gaining traction four or five years ago.

"You started seeing more games that were ports of PC games that were appearing on PlayStation and Nintendo. People were starting to take notice. 'Wait a minute, these were originally PC games. Here's the second game in this

series, but the first game's only on PC. What the heck?'. You had a lot more players being cognisant of this and doing some research. I think that's when it really started to click for a lot of people."

FIGHTING WITH FISH

In 2019, Inti Creates is making a big PC push, bringing more of its games to Steam. The big one is *Gunvolt Chronicles: Luminous Avenger iX*, out in September, which I already love for its brazenly absurd name.

That's the opposite of the measured, brutal, and labyrinthine *La-Mulana 2* from creator Takumi Naramura, which hit Steam in 2018 after eight years of work. And unlike Inti Creates, Naramura had a tiny team. In 2013 he gave a talk at the Game Developer's Conference, addressing a famous statement from Fez designer Phil Fish that Japanese games "just suck". He agreed, Japanese indies were way behind. But that was then.

"I was making *La-Mulana 2* for such a long time that there's actually been kind of a resurgence in the Japanese indie game scene while I was working on it," Naramura says. "I was working very hard to make the best Japanese indie game I could and prove Phil Fish wrong, but I was a bit late to the party, so to speak."

Naramura watched Steam's growth and access to western gamers inspire more indie development in Japan. But he's also felt the squeeze of how many games are released on Steam today.

"The whole time, I was watching this unfold while I was at home working on the game," he says. The Kickstarter funding ran out long before they finished, but he was committed to *La-Mulana 2*. "It was kind of rough, but there's nothing to do but to do it. There were times when I really didn't even know, what do I say to my family? We don't have money. No matter what my family would say to me, there was about a year where I'd say 'I'm not working [on other games]. I'm doing this.'"

LM 2 hasn't done as well as he wanted on PC, but he hopes a console release will make up for it. When I ask what indies can do to stand out on Steam, he says, "I wish someone would tell me." He pauses, and comes back with a more optimistic note, "The best thing is to just make a good game that when players play it, they love it." ■

FAR LEFT: Takumi Naramura hopes his next game won't take eight years to make.

LEFT: He's proud he didn't have to cut any planned features from *La-Mulana 2*.



Love & Poop

In **KATAMARI** Keita Takahashi rolled up the world. In **WATTAM**, he's trying to make sense of it.



Keita Takahashi doesn't really want his award. The creator of *Katamari Damacy* takes the steps up to Bitsummit's stage reluctantly and bows his head for a medal from Dengeki PlayStation magazine, which picked his game *Wattam* for a best-in-show award as Bitsummit draws to a close. It's hard to tell if his aversion to the spotlight is just shyness, but after talking to Keita Takahashi, I'm not surprised to hear him say exactly what he thinks.

"Actually, I do a column in Dengeki PlayStation, so it looks a bit fishy that I'm getting an award from that magazine," he says. "I'm kind of happy to get an award, but not necessarily happy to get it from them. Still, thank you very much." When we talk he's just as blunt, but with the kind of mirthful laugh that radiates from the good-heartedness at the centre of his very strange games. His new game, *Wattam*, has been in development for five years, surviving a cancellation from Sony that left Takahashi to pick up the pieces and start over with a new team. It's finally coming to Steam in 2019. Dengeki PlayStation picked *Wattam*, their speaker said, because everyone who played it or watched it smiled and laughed, and while I don't necessarily think Keita Takahashi is trying to save the world through videogames, I think he is searching for truth and connection with *Wattam*. It is a heart laid bare.

Then again, the first thing he tells me about *Wattam* is that you can eat food and make a poop. "Toilet loves poop," he says. "Toilet wants to flush them." We'll get to the profound stuff a few minutes later.

In *Wattam* you can control something like 100 characters, including a tree or a poop or a toilet, and they all interact with one another in different ways. Cry, and your tears can water a flower to make it grow. Bring characters together and they'll smile and hold hands, dancing in a circle. "I just wanted to make a videogame where the people in the game are all different, but somehow help and work together and get over the differences, and have fun," Takahashi says.

While indie development in Japan is still slowly finding its footing, Keita Takahashi did something even harder. He left Japan, moving first to Vancouver and then to San Francisco. That move inspired *Wattam*. In Vancouver he worked in a multicultural office for the first

time, watching people from all over the world collaborate in English.

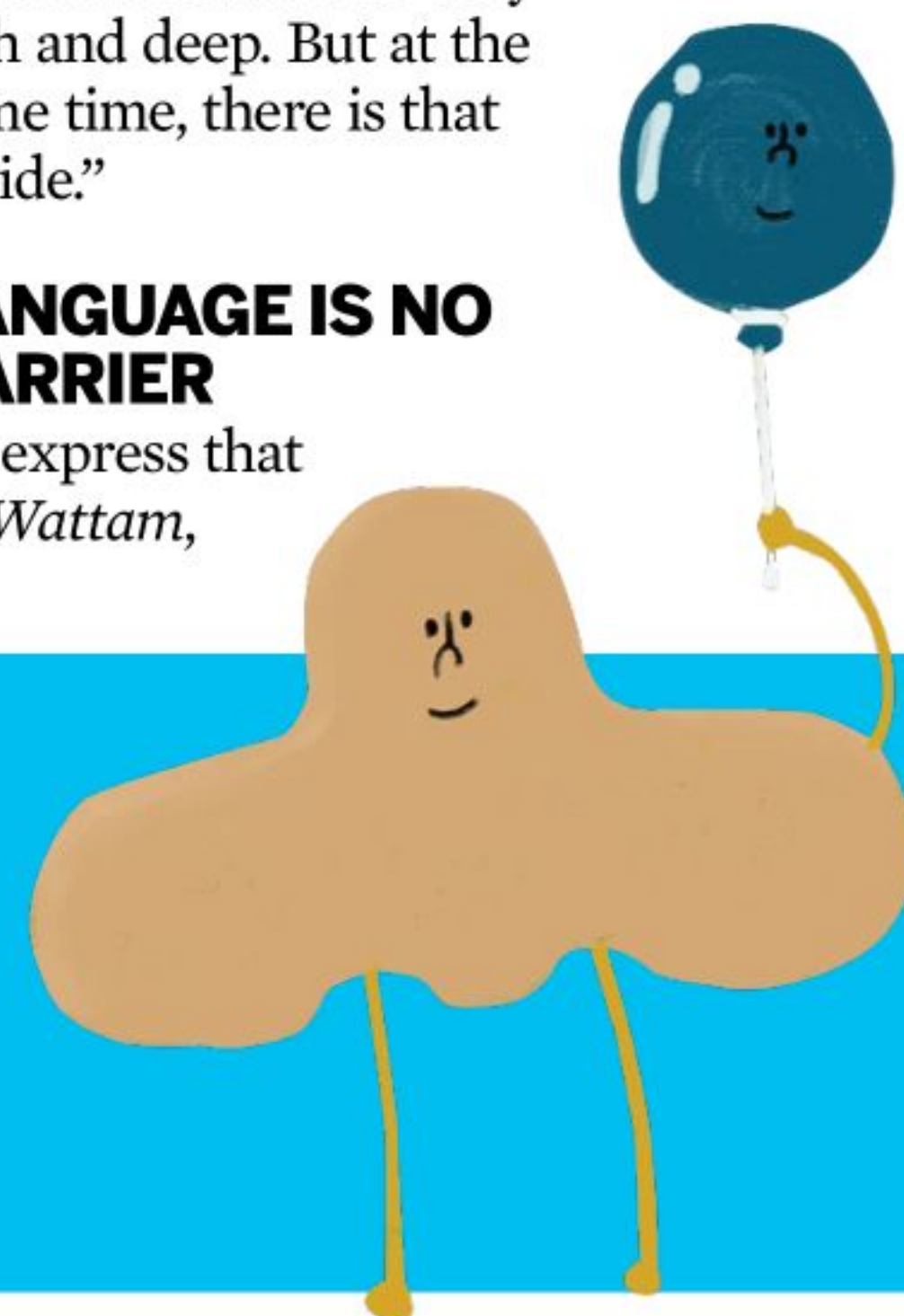
"People can work together and get over their differences and make something new. That's great," he says. "But at the same time, we still have so many issues. War. Fights. Frictions. Those are made by the differences, the different perspectives of religion or country or skin colour. That sucks. But if we all were the same type of people, the world would get so boring. If all people were Asian, talking the same language, doing the same culture, it may be useful, but I don't think that's nice. The differences make us very rich and deep. But at the same time, there is that divide."

LANGUAGE IS NO BARRIER

To express that in *Wattam*,

LEFT: Takahashi is awarded a medal at the end of Bitsummit.

ABOVE: If *Wattam* is about anything, it's making friends.



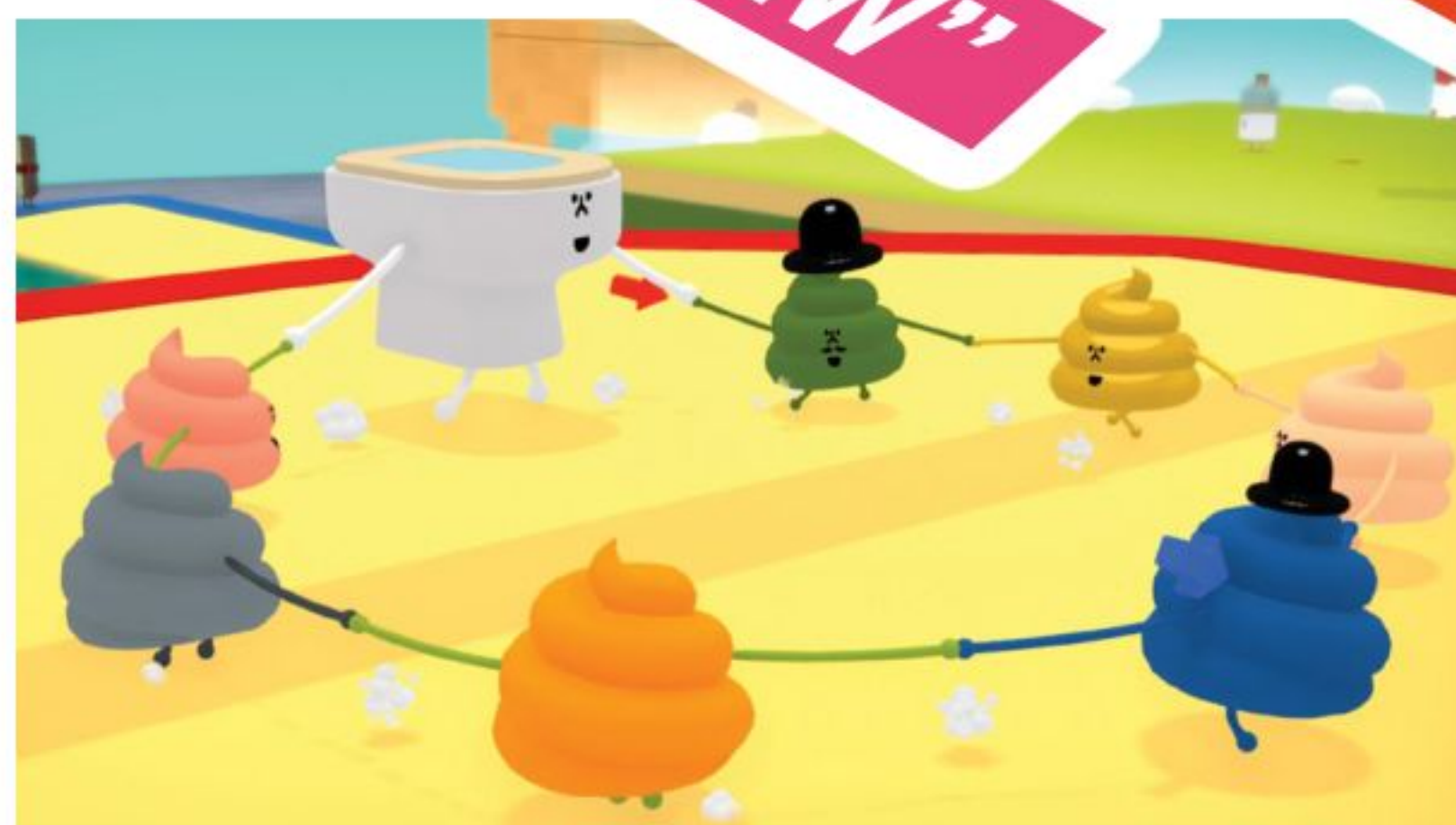


your characters at first speak only in one language. When you travel to a new world, the characters there will speak another language, like Russian or Korean. “But after you have fun with them, make an explosion with them,” Takahashi waves his arms and mimics *Wattam*’s sound effects, “after that, when they say ‘Hi’ in a different language, it doesn’t matter.

“I just wanted to make a videogame where the people in the game are all different, but somehow help and work together and get over the differences, and have fun.”

I can’t think of a game we need more in 2019, or a better representation of Bitsummit’s indie spirit – although, ironically, *Wattam* is only the game it is because Keita Takahashi doesn’t care about indie development in Japan, or Steam, or what any other game developers are doing. “I’m so sorry. I don’t care about the game industry,” he tells me, laughing, a little embarrassed. “Why do I have to care about the industry or any trend? I don’t know what an indie game is. I don’t even know what a videogame is. I don’t know what a toy is.

“Sometimes an interviewer asks me about the difference between a toy and a videogame. ‘Why does my game feel more like a toy than a game?’ I always say ‘I don’t know, I don’t care about that. I just want to make a fun thing’.” ■



LEFT: “Toilet loves poop.” Can’t you tell?



NEON TRAIL

A promising rollerblading game with a steep learning curve. Mastering momentum and turning is more complex here than in any skating game I’ve played, but it might give *Jet Set Radio* fans something new to love, if RocketJuice can pull it off.



SEED HUNTER

A gorgeous action roguelike with weapons that were inspired by the *Monster Hunter* series. You can try it now, as it’s out on Steam Early Access. *Seed Hunter* is notable for being a Chinese-developed game that has actually been released in English.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



All things to all people

A disturbing trend among forums and comment sections is the attitude that if I, a gamer, enjoy games, then by default I should be the target audience for all games. It's an unsustainable position if you think about it for even a handful of minutes. And yet so much of the anger – the 'anti-consumer' ranting, the gatekeeping, the actual death threats – that plagues gaming discussion seems to stem from an attitude that developers should kowtow to gamers regardless of their actual audience or goals.

Over the next 30 pages, we've got another broad selection of games. Some of them won't be for you – even the really good ones. That's fine. Because some of the others you'll probably love. This is a vibrant, growing industry, and diversity makes it stronger.

Phil Savage

PHIL SAVAGE

EDITOR

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LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's freedom fighters...



JAMES DAVENPORT
Specialist in Shooters, XP
Currently playing *Wolfenstein: Youngblood*
This month Slowly chipped away at Nazi armour.



MALINDY HETFELD
Specialist in Adventure, blocks
Currently playing *Beyond: Two Souls*
This month Found a *Tetris* game she liked and a David Cage game she didn't.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in Racing, trucks
Currently playing *FIA European Truck Racing Championship*
This month Took his love for *Euro Truck Simulator 2* to its natural conclusion.



STEVEN MESSNER
Specialist in MMOs, peer pressure
Currently playing *Final Fantasy XIV*
This month Persuaded even more of the PCG team to play an MMO.



TOM HATFIELD
Specialist in Management sims, conveyerbelts
Currently playing *Automachef*
This month Sent his compliments to the robo-chefs. A few insults too.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in Free, wizards
Currently playing *Transmute!*
This month Used equivalent exchange to transmute reviews into money.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in Retro, the sea
Currently playing *Subnautica*
This month Didn't get eaten by a whale. Celebrated by playing some games about the sea.

TWISTED SISTERS

WOLFENSTEIN: YOUNGBLOOD is the series at its worst and best. *By James Davenport*

Wolfenstein: Youngblood shifts the focus from the previous games' bubblegum catharsis of killing the most hateful people alive to killing them as efficiently as possible. The Nazis have health bars now, and a true pistol shot to the head or axe to the throat won't always cut it. You and a friend (or computer) need to level up to more effectively chip away the white portion of their health bars to get to the red portion, the blood and guts inside.

Over the course of my playthrough I noticed my gaze would increasingly drift away from the glorious violence and up towards the health bars. *Youngblood* is grisly and indulgent and an incredible setting, but burdens the player with calculations of time and efficiency rather than gift them another cosmic victory lap. Taking out Nazis remains as comic as ever, but the fun is tempered by a levelling system that slows down the action and pacing far too often.

Youngblood is a co-op venture with a completely different structure than the linear pathing of the last two games. This one's set in three districts of 1980s Nazi-controlled Paris, more open and free to explore than *The New Order* and *New Colossus*, but not a seamless singular open world. You and a friend (or AI) play as B.J. Blazkowicz's twin teenage daughters. When daddy Blazkowicz heads to Paris without a word, they're compelled to hijack a helicopter and look for pops, disrupting the local Nazi occupation all the while.

I miss the surprisingly heartfelt characters and incessant goofing off. It's here, too, but only at major

Each district is home to a Nazi stronghold called a Brother

narrative milestones and in short bursts of dialogue between the sisters, too often drowned out by gunfire and screams or overlapping radio comms. There's just enough narrative to keep things moving, though, and it sets the series up for a surreal, badass finale.

With the story so slight, the best part of *Youngblood* is easily the level design. Arkane Studios of *Dishonored* and *Prey* came on board to design Paris, and it shows in every inch. Open windows four stories up are invitations inside, with a new focus on height thanks to a double-jump ability available from the start.

Each district is completely open to exploration, assuming high-level Nazis don't make it impossible. Some highlights from my home invasions: a grimy apartment home to an amateur Nazi rock band, junk food and empty sodas piled up in the corners, a drum set and guitars on wooden pallets

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A co-op shooter set in '80s Nazi-occupied Paris

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Machine Games, Arkane Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, i9-9900k,
32 GB RAM, SSD
Multiplayer: Two-player
co-op

MULTIPLAYER
Two-player co-op

LINK
bethesda.net

stuffed into the crowded living area; a banal Nazi office space lined with dreary, featureless cubicles, the ennui alive and well in every timeline; a video rental store advertising televisions and VHS players and campy horror movies with a distinct fascist twist.

KOPFSCHUSS

There's so much pressing players to move on, but I wanted to linger in every space to soak up all the original art and details propping up the gorgeous alt-history nightmare. It's not as cohesive as *Dishonored* and assets repeat quite often, but exploring *Youngblood's* tiny cut of Paris is the reason to play. I want every *Wolfenstein* game to give me time to breathe and explore like this.

Each district is home to a massive Nazi stronghold called a Brother, and infiltrating each is part of the greater mission at hand. It's possible to waltz in the front door of all of them after the introductory mission, but exploration and finishing up side missions will yield safer routes inside and new tools to make the job easier. Unless you're a stealth god, walking in without upgrading any guns or abilities is going to be a challenge.

In one side mission I find a battery that powers a laser mounted on a bus. I use this laser to melt a hole through a thick layer of reinforced steel blocking a city street bordering a Brother station. A sewer entrance on the other side leads to a labyrinth beneath the district, and

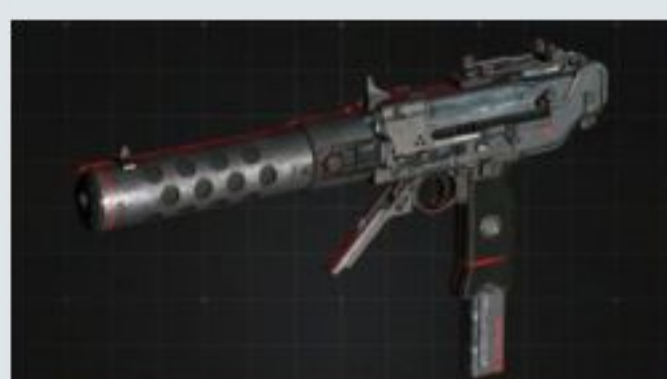
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RECOMMENDED SPECS

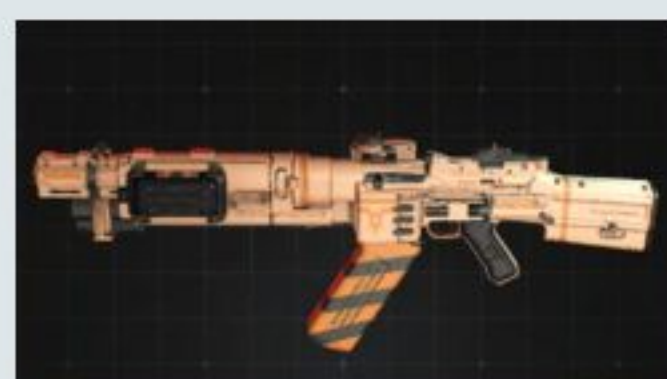
Attachments give weapons stat bonuses. Pair them like this:



PISTOLE:
ACCURACY



MASCHINENPISTOLE:
DAMAGE



BLITZGEWEHR:
FIRE RATE



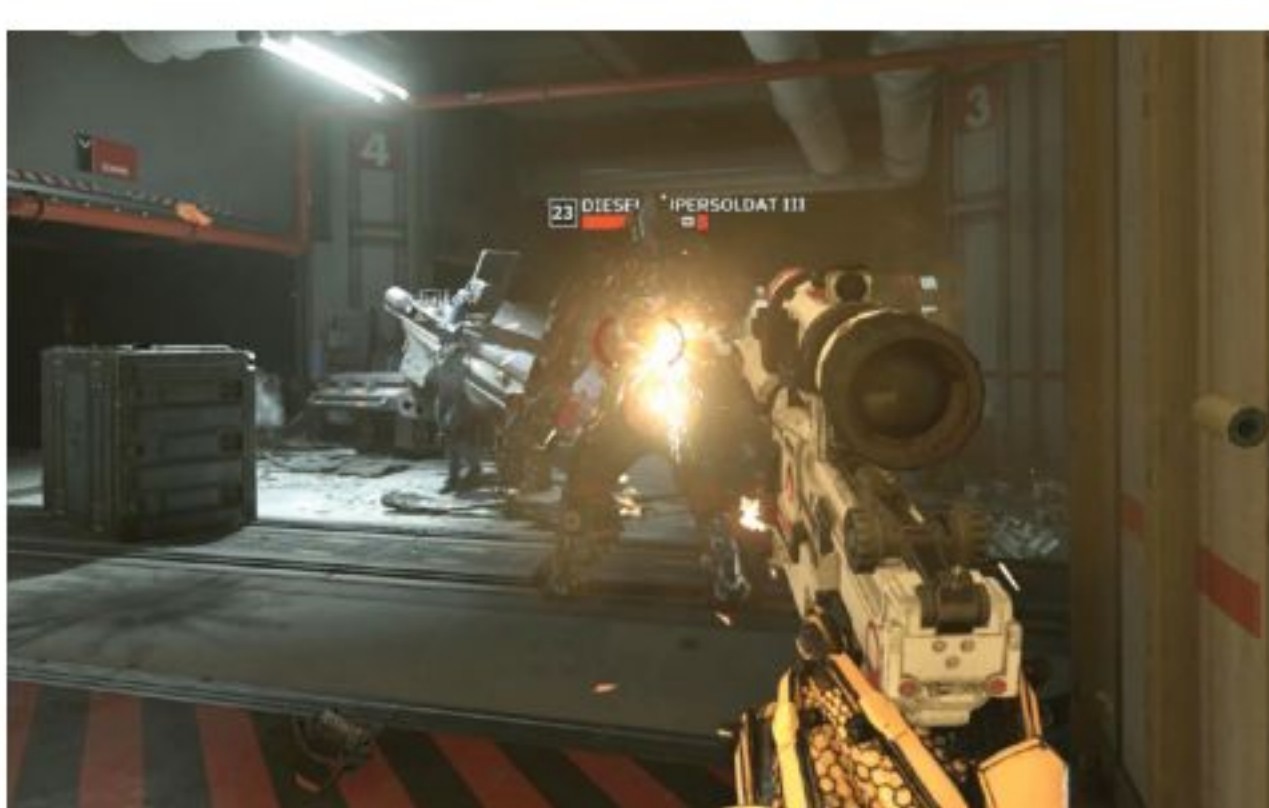
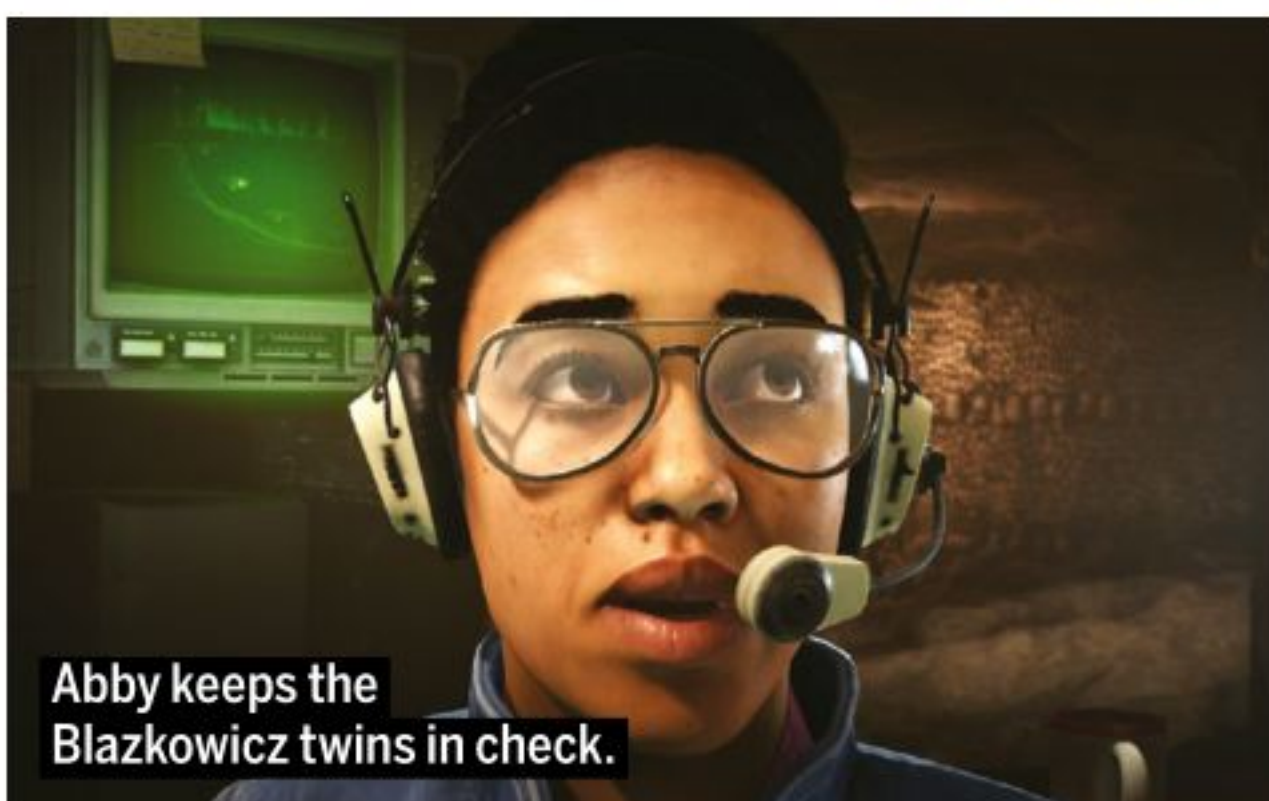
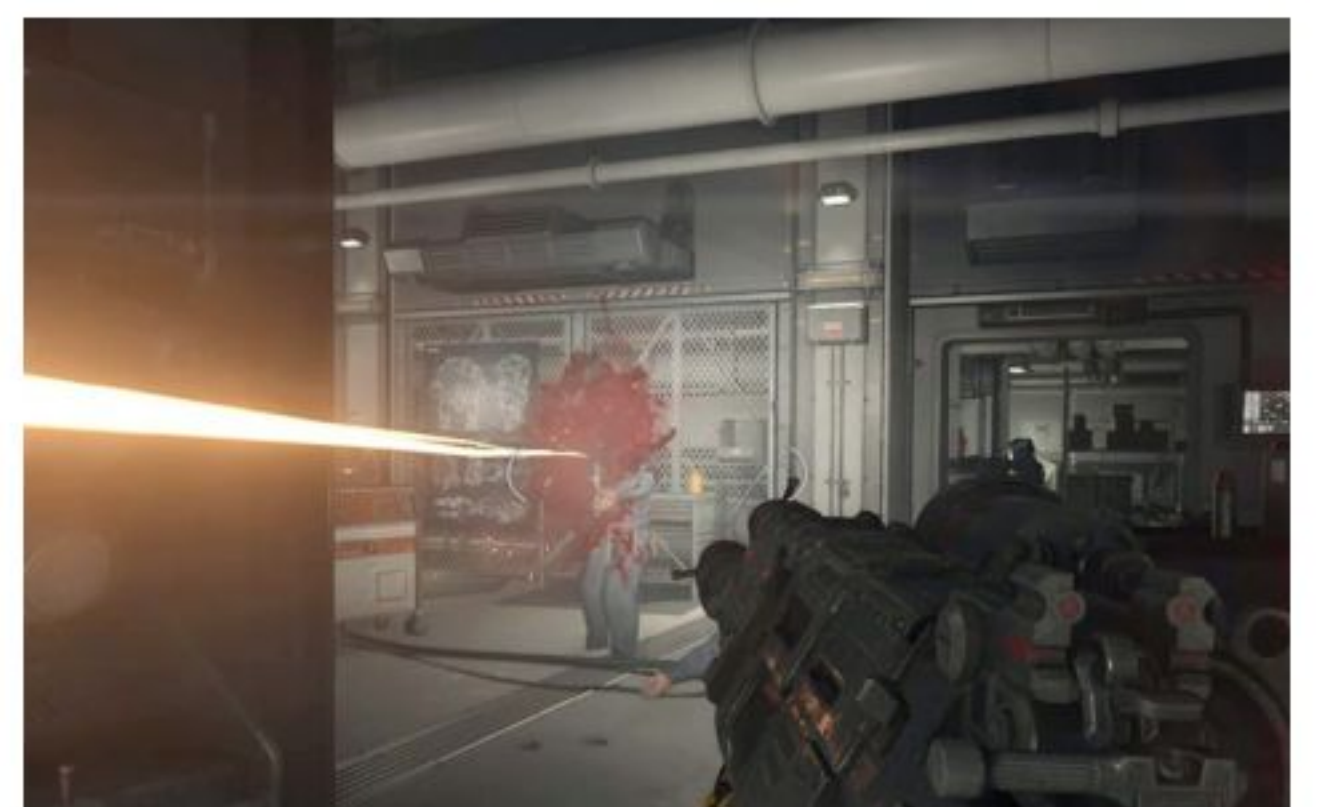
STURMGEWehr:
ACCURACY



KUGELGEWEHR:
DAMAGE



Like mother, like daughter



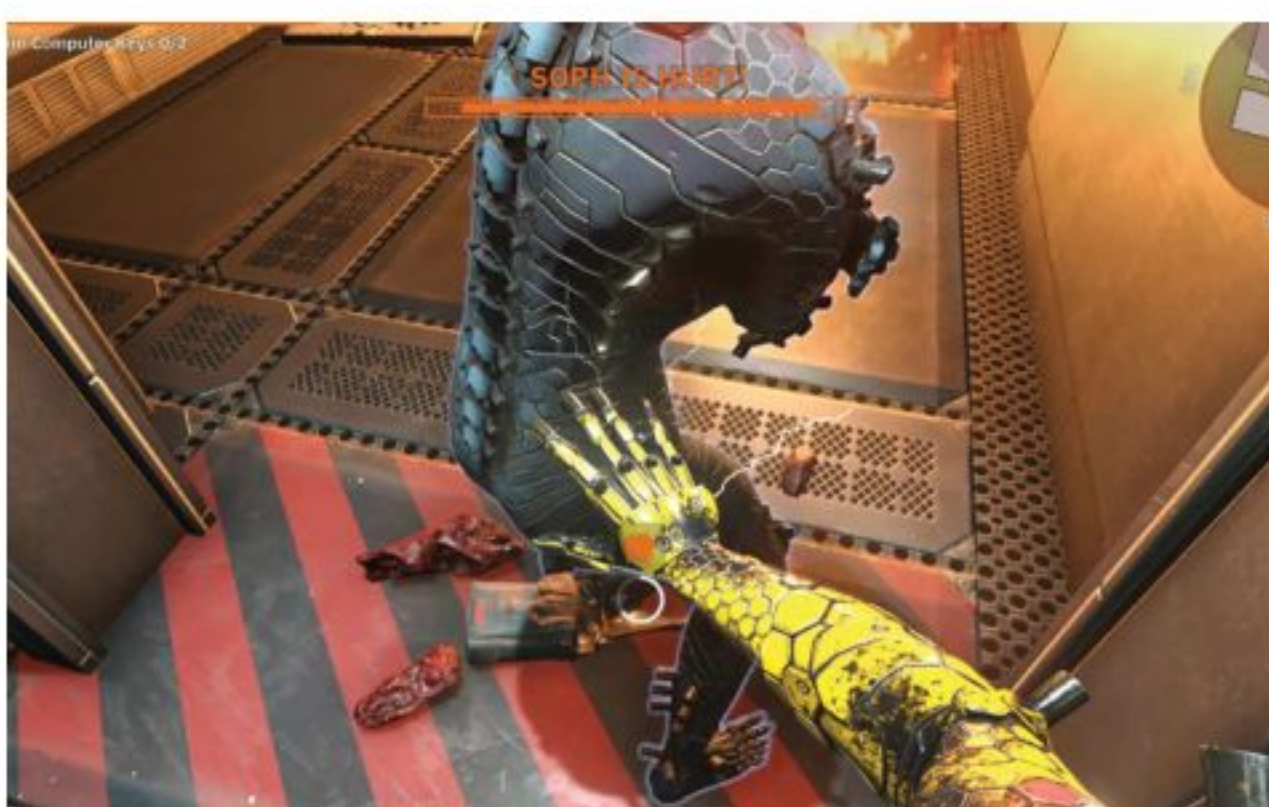
Raid Mission: Brother 2

Use Lobby Elevator

Plenty of Nazi memorabilia to destroy.

91 + 164

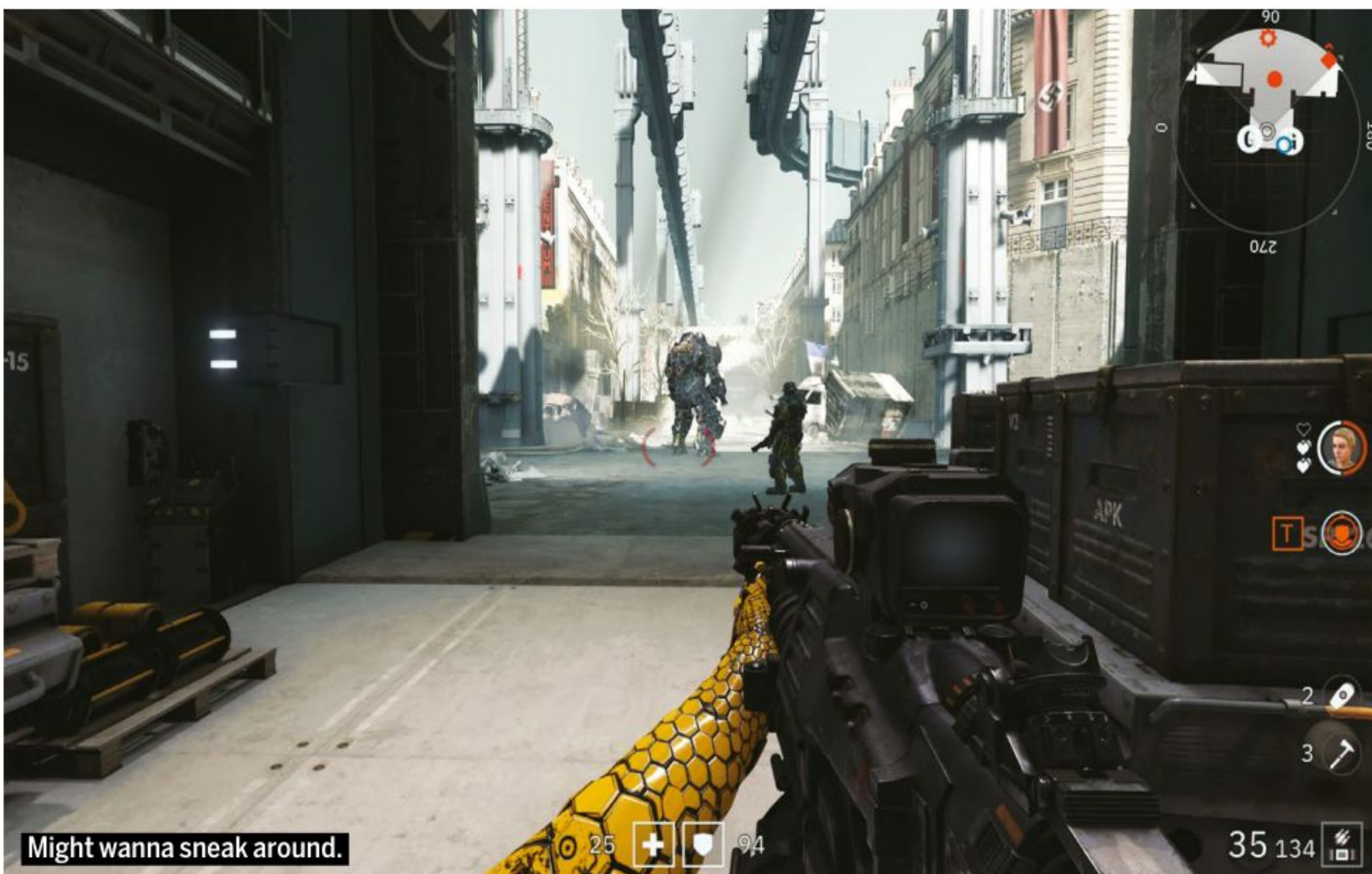
25 43



Jessie's the calm, collected twin.



TFW you can't choose your friends.

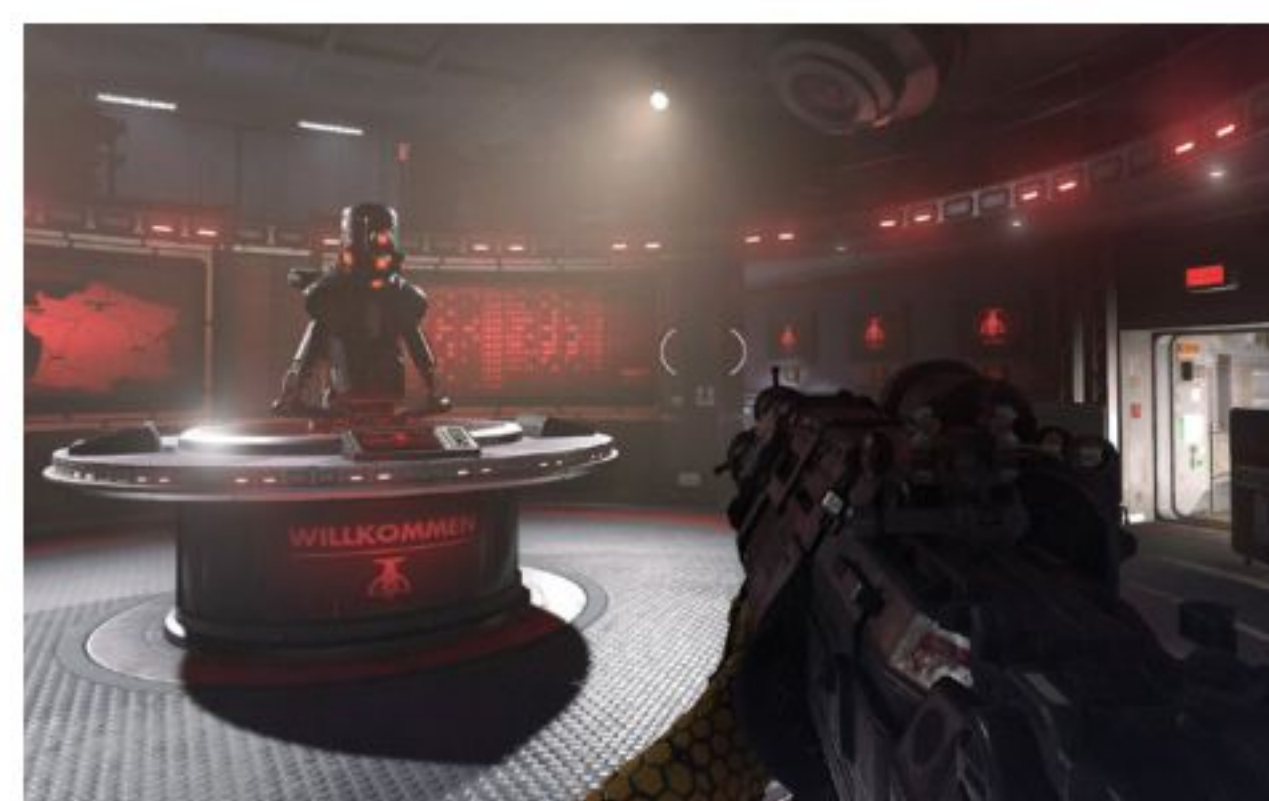


Might wanna sneak around.

35 134



Bosses take a little too long to go down.



» some *Doom 3*-esque shooting ensues – suicide vest wearing dogs rush me in the total darkness while I struggle to pick them off with a pistol in one hand and a flashlight in the other. Should've saved up for the shotgun flashlight attachment.

Once through, I ascend a massive tower, leaping around its edges on sketchy scaffolding. Paris stretches out into the smoggy horizon as an army of zeppelins flitter in and out of the grey sky like plump gods. It's an amazing view, and I'm glad I took the time to get there through the back door. No other game series does alt-history fiction like this – gorgeous, horrific, and so, so dumb.

AUFLEVELN

Like the previous games, stealth is more of a way to soften up the arena before getting loud and messy. Slipping up and unleashing a horde of soldiers is easy; soldiers in chunky exoskeletons, Panzerhunds, drones, and huge mechs. They keep coming until the wiry commander hanging out somewhere in the back dies. And because there are two good guys with guns, there are also way more enemies in *Youngblood*.

Pep Signals are abilities on a cooldown that let players buff one another to soften the onslaught, whether it's reviving them from a distance or overcharging their armour in the thick of it.

It's a nice way to remind my partner that we're playing together, because little of *Youngblood* requires any cooperation.

Computers make good friends too. I spent about half the campaign with an AI companion, who never got in the way and required next to no babysitting. I'm pretty sure they can't break stealth status, either. Every now and then we'll need to turn two keys at the same time, but otherwise *Youngblood* works like a big dumb shooting gallery in an amazing setting with optional co-op. Little brainpower is required.

As per usual, *Wolfenstein*'s guns look and behave like guns that made love to a coal train. They're oily, iron contraptions that clap when the trigger is pulled – except for the cute poot of the silenced pistol – and kick like hell.

I'm partial to the shotgun. There's a boom, then a Nazi flinches and usually falls into a few pieces. That is, unless they're a level 25 Nazi and



PEP PAIRINGS

These Pep Signals complement one another in co-op perfectly



FIGHTING STANCE

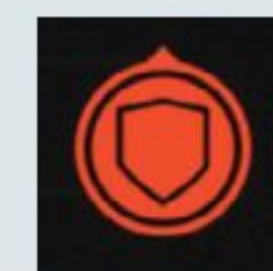
Double damage for five seconds / Revive from afar



GET UP



MARTIAL ART



+ CYBORG 1980

Both get full health / Both get full armour

I'm only level 22. When a classic videogame shotgun does not dissolve a man immediately, I begin to think that something isn't right. Those damn health bars.

But eight hours in and with thousands of credits saved up from completing side missions and opening crates hidden around the world, I finally finish upgrading the shotgun. It becomes what it was always meant to be. I can turn unarmoured enemies into mist and chip away at the big guys much more effectively, though they're still stubbornly hardheaded. I don't change weapons often anymore, even if there are others that are more effective at dissolving different types of armour. I've settled comfortably into my loud and boisterous playstyle. A little too late, if you ask me.

For all its visual splendour and rad guns and alluring locales, *Youngblood* is compromised by a progression system that feels wholly designed to exploit attention and time, to deliver a tiny dopamine rush with every level up or skill upgrade or new weapon attachment, none of which changed how I play.

Unlockable abilities are linear anyway – more health, more shields, more damage when charging someone. The only tax is on your time. The levels might be designed by Arkane Studios, but I wasn't capable of carving out creative solutions with skill points in *Youngblood*. I just made the guns and meatheads better at shooting and stabbing.

FESTSITZEN

Levelling is a momentum killer. Once the final missions became available, I wanted to stay on the ride, but the next mission was rated two levels

higher than my character level. I played it anyway because the foreboding skull icon signifying a massive level discrepancy wasn't there. I saw it as a green light. And while the smaller enemies went down with single clicks from my super shotgun, armoured enemies required ducking in and out of cover and sprinting circles around the map in search of more ammo, armour, health, and grenades just to whittle down their armour.

I forgot I was making evil people explode and started looking at the clock. To make sure those final fights didn't drag, I would've had to play a side quest or two – a 30 minute or more intermission – right before the final act. That's bonkers pacing.

Why slow things down? Grinding out side missions and dailies isn't rewarding, they're barriers. The *Wolf* games are best when there's nothing between the player and

the action. The real treat is the arrangement of limbs and gristle and scarlet spilling into these incredibly detailed Parisian street gutters.

The drop-in and drop-out co-op is great and the gun and character upgrades are fairly in line with the previous games, but the levelling system places speed bumps on my cosmic reparations murder-parade route. *Youngblood* is a great time, even better with friends, but it drags whenever the level system demands attention. It only stings because it's just so unnecessary. ■

Pep Signals are abilities on a cooldown that let players buff one another

PC GAMER VERDICT

Youngblood's gorgeous, terrible world is worth exploring, despite a slight narrative and boring progression systems.

79

BLOCK ROCKING

TETRIS EFFECT breathes new life into the classic puzzle. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

Tetris is one of those games that is so ingrained in our pop-cultural fabric that I don't need to explain to you that, in it, you slot different blocks together until they form an unbroken line. Despite its age *Tetris* also isn't necessarily a game that inspires particular nostalgia, seeing as there are hundreds of versions for every platform out there already. It's just *Tetris*, so why bother with another one, I asked colleagues and friends after *Tetris Effect* came out for consoles last year.

An unapologetic *Tetris* disliker myself, I found it odd that everyone was acting as if Jesus himself had coded *Tetris Effect*. Despite being a Soviet classic, *Tetris* has always had an oddly Japanese flavour – it's one of those games you either bounce off of or reach levels of mastery in that speak of obsession, just like games such as *Ikaruga* or *Dance Dance Revolution*.

Much has been said about how *Tetris* hits the perfect balance between challenge and skill in so many players that it induces flow, drawing you in. As someone with a spatial perception so bad *Tetris* was literally used to test me for brain damage, I could never attain the flow state or understand the supposedly universal appeal.

ENLIGHTENMENT

Tetris Effect, however, has given me something I can understand, namely colours and sounds that combine in a way that pleasantly tickles some very primal part of my brain. There was never much of a reward for finishing

lines in the original *Tetris*, and its sound design was stressful to the point where losing felt like punishment. Whenever I succeed in *Tetris Effect*, there's always something new to see and hear.

Tetris Effect uses images universally pleasing to human beings

My actions, from twisting and turning Tetrominos to arranging them in order, are now part of a whole musical and sound effect landscape. In one of the levels, the blocks look to be made of wood and make pleasant clunking sounds when set down. Elsewhere they crinkle like crystal.

Music and background visuals work together like a slowly building symphony with distinct movements – after a few rounds the visual shifts, revealing the level's theme or adding to it in a meaningful way.

Whales of light weave through invisible oceans in the background, fireworks glitter or hypnotic shapes multiply to the point they'll leave an imprint on your retinas.

As a level evolves, the music swells. Several tracks involve thrumming techno beats that speed

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A puzzle game elevated to an audiovisual experience

EXPECT TO PAY
£32

DEVELOPER
Monstars/Resonair

PUBLISHER
Enhance, Inc.

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-8400, GTX 1060, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
www.tetriseffect.game



the game up literally and figuratively. It can be a lot to take in at first, and not every sound effect works equally well. Sometimes the visuals turn out to be distracting, or I can't appreciate them as much as I would want to because the game is going at a speed that won't let me.

But the changing nature of each of the 30 stages makes you want to explore each of them and find out what's next. If the flow isn't in the game itself, it's in the strands of music you'll be humming long after you've finally put the game down, a unique *Tetris Effect* all of its own – similar to the compulsion to arrange everything into neat shapes the term originally describes.

CONVERSION

Tetris Effect uses images universally pleasing to human beings, not unlike a meditation app, no matter if it's rain falling in a quiet forest or a view of earth from up above.

Even though it was originally developed for PC, due to its strong appeal as a VR game, I did the most I could in order to play it with a console-like setup. Only the biggest screen would do, and likely due to years of habit it felt odd to play it without a D-pad. Controller rumble also adds an extra layer to *Tetris Effect* that's not to be missed.

Tetris Effect freed me of the pressure to hunt for high scores. However, if that's what you're after, there are several additional ways to play such as the combo mode, speed mode and endless mode that will let you have the *Tetris* experience that's perfect for you.

I've successfully been converted to the church of *Tetris Effect*, because there really is something for everyone to enjoy here. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Whole new affecting sensory layers make *Tetris Effect* the best version of an already timeless game.

90

ENHANCE! More candidates for the Mizuguchi Effect



GALAGA
More spatial depth and cool, colourful explosions, please.



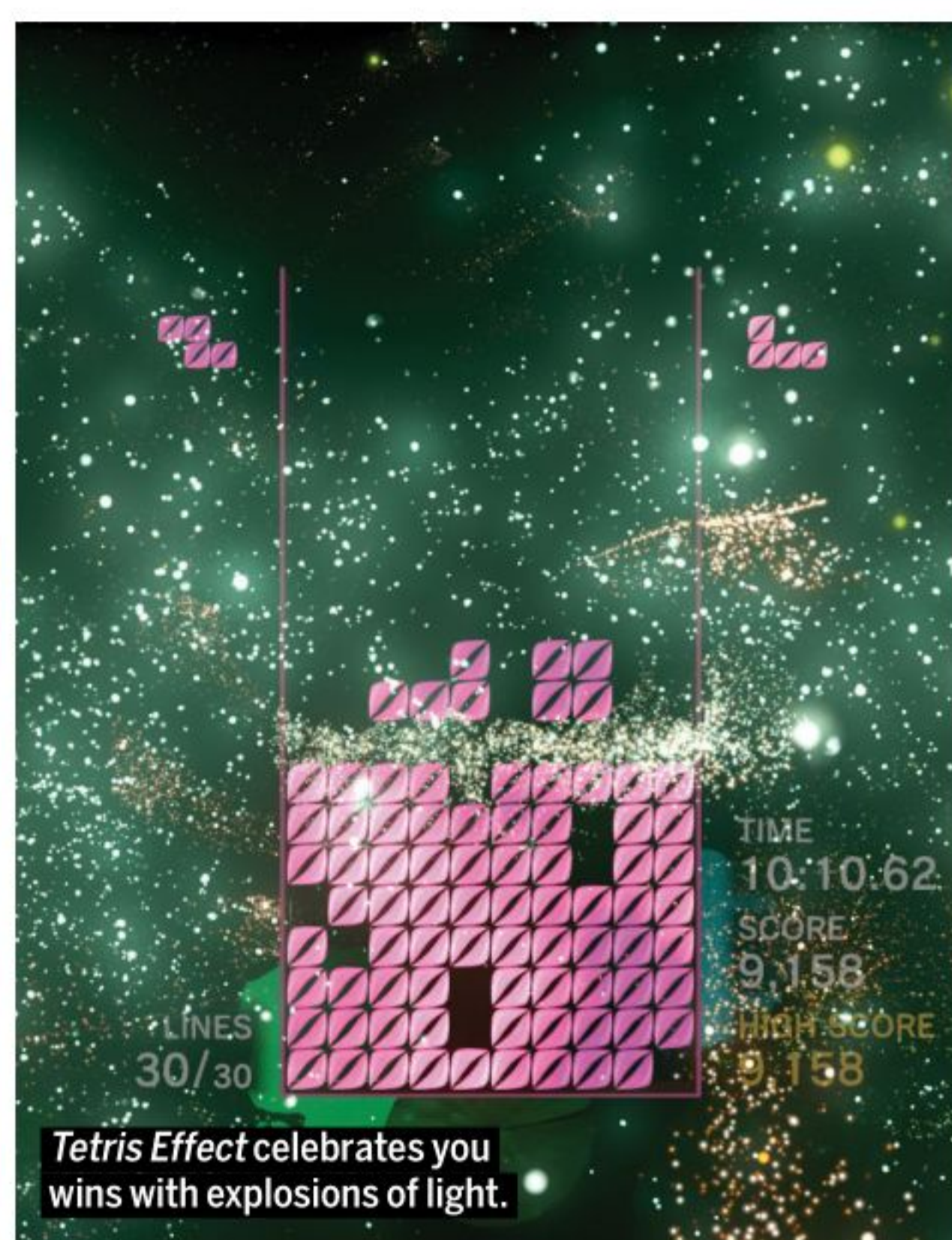
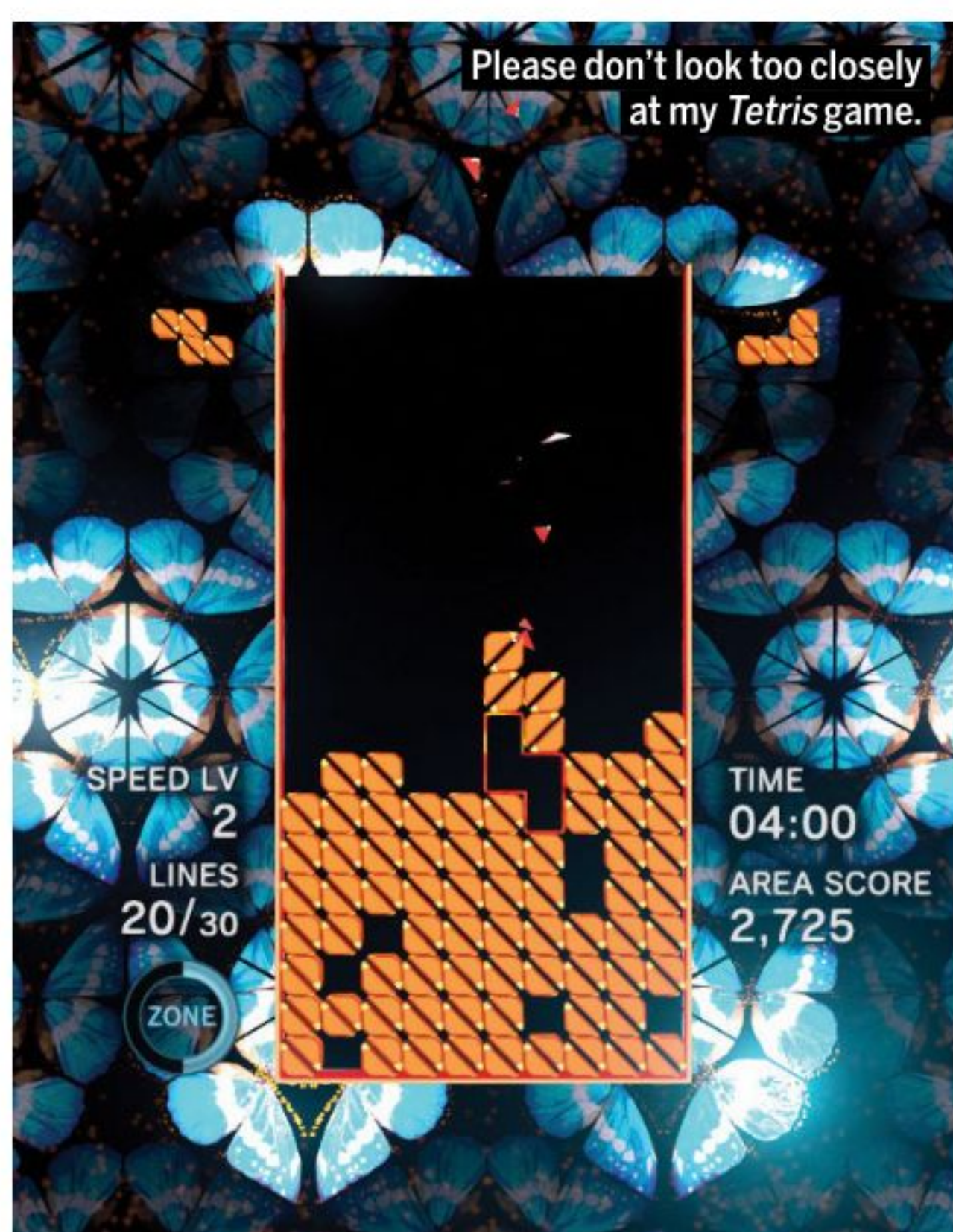
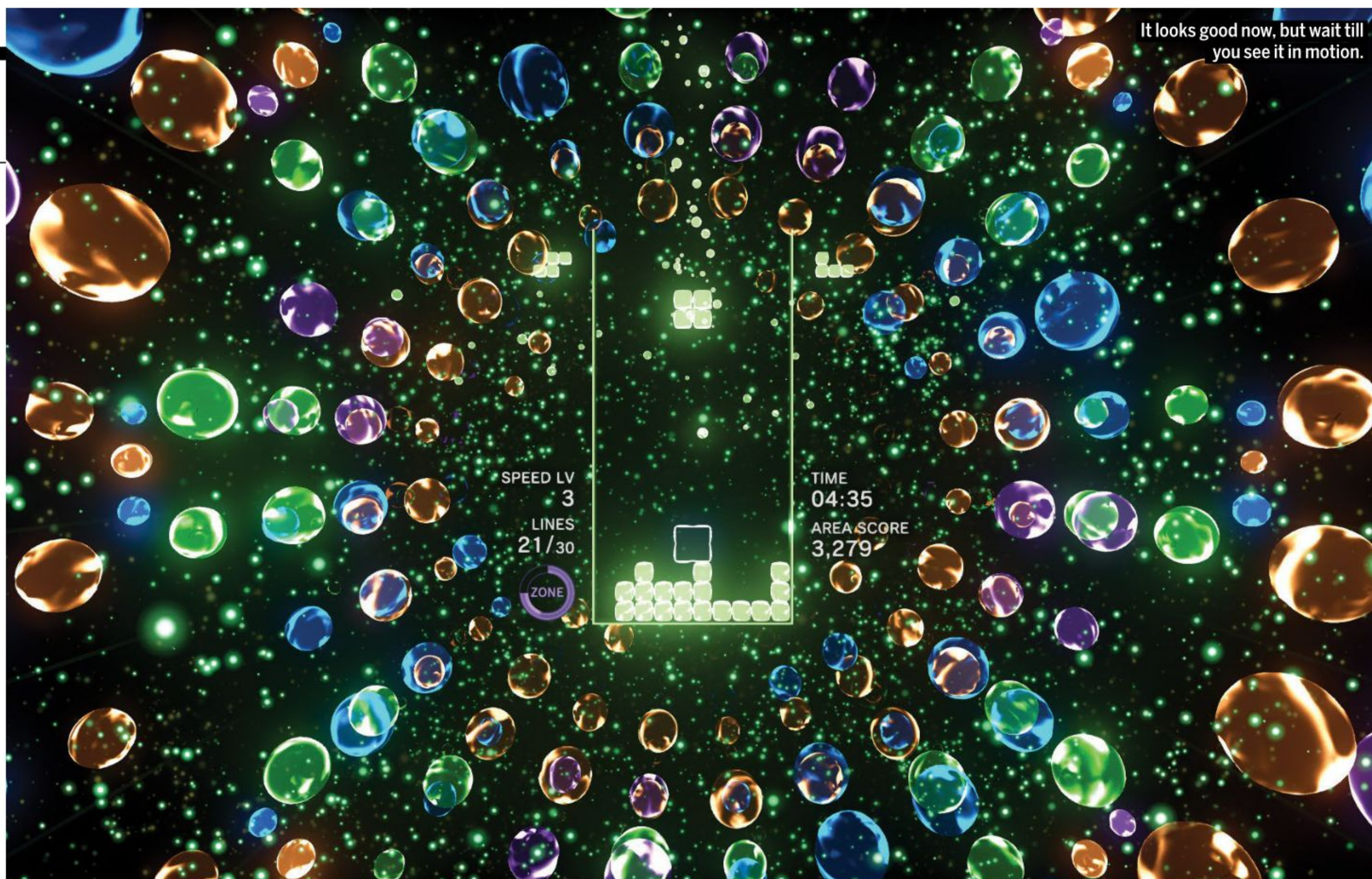
SONIC
Can you imagine what a hypnotic fever dream *Sonic* could be?



FANTAVISION
Fantavision and *TE* have a lot in common already, it's an obvious choice.



BUST-A-MOVE
Look, all I'm saying is I would not miss those two dragons.



SPIRIT BOMB

In **BEYOND: TWO SOULS**, a ghost keeps a young woman from leading a normal life. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

In following a game as successful as *Heavy Rain*, *Beyond: Two Souls* didn't have an easy job. *Heavy Rain* established a type of choice-based game unparalleled in scope, even when compared to the work of studios such as Bioware or Telltale. For its next title, Quantic Dream went bigger and bolder, but reduced the game elements even further, a decision that results in an oddly bland experience.

For as long as she can remember, Jodie (Ellen Page) has shared her body with Aiden, an entity with no corporeal form who speaks only to her – and causes her no end of trouble. Throughout the story, which you can either play in its original, non-chronological form or in a new 'remix mode' that tells the story in order, you play as both. Ironically, this often means you have control over the uncontrollable part of Jodie's life, which you experience as a series of disconnected scenes encompassing a tragic childhood, teen rebellion, and adult angst. Especially early on, Aiden does what he wants, which is act like a petulant poltergeist whenever he's mad at Jodie or she's in danger. Similar to *Heavy Rain*'s control scheme, this means you waggle an analogue stick or press a few keys to smash mirrors or upend chairs.

Aiden has whatever supernatural power is needed to move the plot forward, and so you waggle to heal, cast a shield, blow ethereal smoke into Jodie's face to give her a vision of

the past, and more. As her, you pick things up, open doors, and, because this is a Quantic Dream game, perform mundane tasks such as washing the dishes or, inevitably, taking a shower. The button combos range from boring to frustratingly counterintuitive throughout. In fight scenes, you're supposed to move the stick in the direction Jodie moves her body, but her movements telegraph badly, and the fact that each action waits for your input saps it completely of momentum.

TEEN SPIRIT

Beyond: Two Souls is about its narrative, first and foremost. You watch Jodie grow up, and eventually you follow her through beautifully rendered settings such as small, neon-lit bars and sprawling deserts. 'Watch' and 'follow' are the key words here, though, as *Beyond* features almost no meaningful choices. In *Heavy Rain* your decisions had a clear impact on the story, but here the outcome of a scene and the

Aiden does what he wants, which is act like a petulant poltergeist

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An interactive film about a woman and her ghost

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Quantic Dream

PUBLISHER
Quantic Dream

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-8400, GTX 1060, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
www.quanticdream.com

larger narrative is always the same. Your only alternative to doing what the game wants you to do is inaction, which can lead to sequences just abruptly cutting off.

Beyond is a ghost story and a character drama mixed with a conventional military videogame plot, starring a protagonist I simply couldn't warm to. Jodie doesn't act so much as react – growing up in a medical facility under the care of Nathan Dawkins (Willem Dafoe) she does what she's told, and whenever she rebels, the consequences are catastrophic. *Beyond* exhibits everything bad that can happen to a woman in one life – deliberately shocking and at points uncomfortable to watch. But convincing performances by the A-list cast do help to invest emotion and drama into the scenes, particularly when it comes to the relationship between Jodie and Nathan.

In her 20s, our hero is forcibly drafted into the CIA, which turns a portion of the game into the world's slowest cover shooter. The overwrought moral choices in this section feel completely at odds with how much time is spent elsewhere thoughtlessly killing people as Aiden on Jodie's command. Parts of the story feel completely disconnected from the main plot – here Jodie gets to meet new people, but these bonding experiences feel rushed.

I spent the entire game waiting for Jodie to explore her relationship with the actual ghost in the room, the part I actually cared about, but for the most part Aiden just acts alternately as a game device or a menace, and for all that Quantic Dream has Hollywood sensibilities, the plot drifts off into the kind of nonsense reserved only for videogames. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

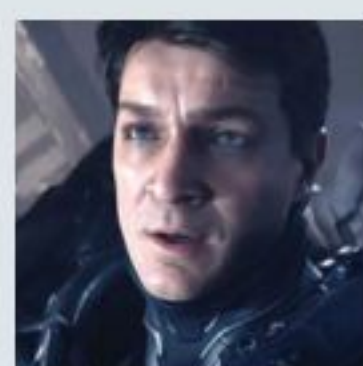
Hollywood production values and performances unfortunately can't save *Beyond: Two Souls'* tangled, trite story.

60

I KNOW YOU! Celebrities who've lent their likenesses to games



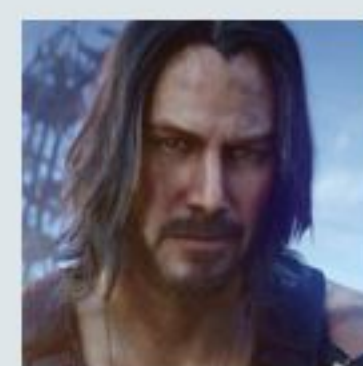
KEVIN SPACEY
CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE
He became the face of the game's marketing, which hasn't aged at all well.



NATHAN FILLION
HALO 3
Did *Halo* need Nathan Fillion? No. Were we happy to see him regardless? Absolutely.



TAKESHI KANESHIRO
ONIMUSHA: WARLORDS
Kaneshiro was one of the first, back when actors in games was revolutionary.



KEANU REEVES
CYBERPUNK 2077
A 'breathtaking' star turn that'll see 2019's man of the hour living in a chip inside your head.



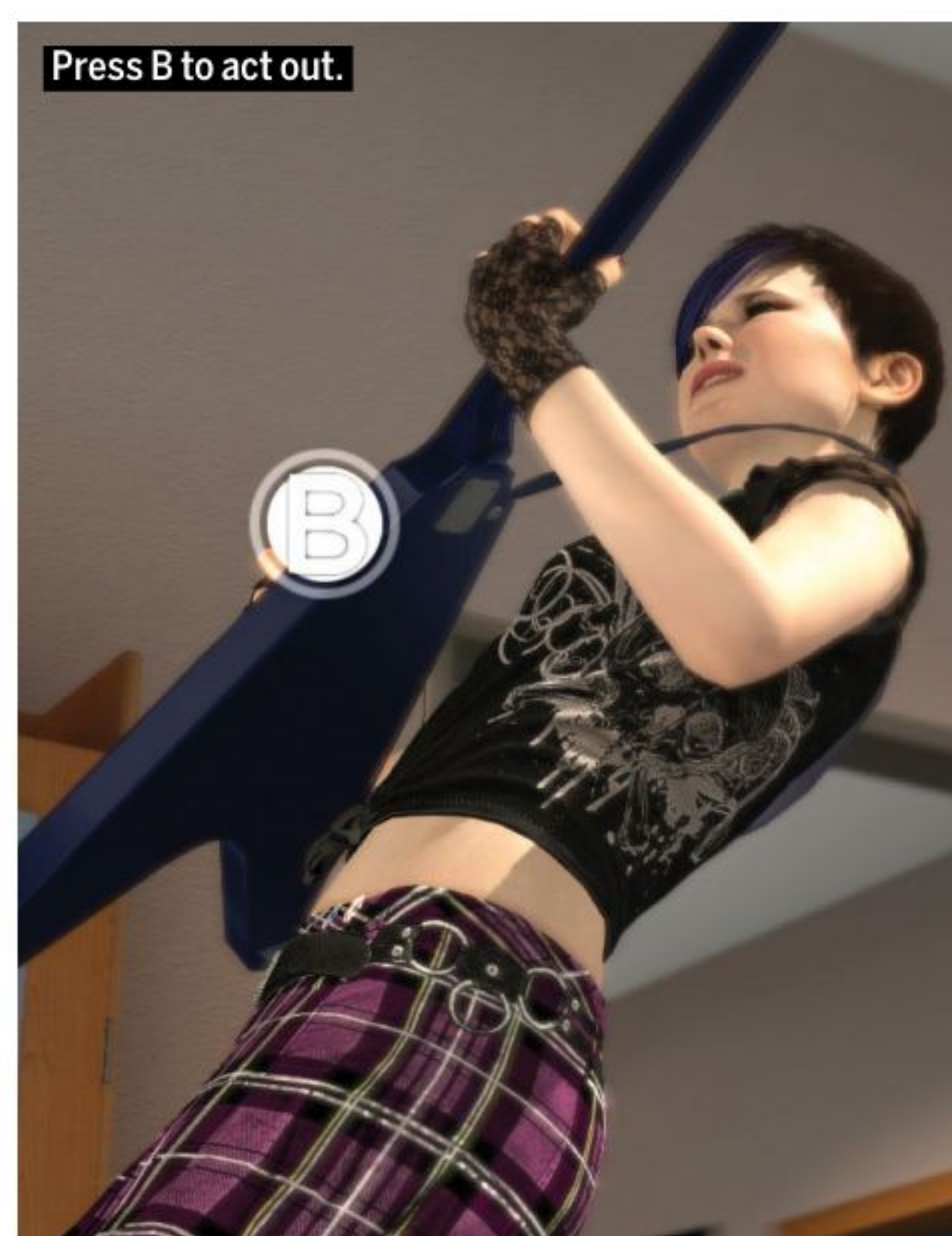
This will turn out to have been a bad idea in 3... 2... 1...



Action sequences are well directed and exciting to watch.



The moments in the lab are the most heartfelt and enjoyable.



Press B to act out.



This is just about the most fumbling I have ever done.



SPACE RACE

AGE OF WONDERS: PLANETFALL injects fast-paced, tactical fun into the 4X's ageing conquest model. *By Ian Boudreau*

Revenge is a dish best served cold, the ancient Klingon saying goes, and nobody knows this better than penguins. Having made the interstellar journey to this dusty backwater planet alongside my rugged band of frontier fighters, the penguins quickly proved themselves admirable fighters in our war against the vicious psychic bugs who showed up first. As my troopers fell prey to the insects' virulent battle vomit, the ten-foot penguins swooped in to tear the bugs apart with trisected beaks.

Age of Wonders: Planetfall is the long-running fantasy series' sci-fi spin-off, the *Alpha Centauri* to *Age of Wonders: Civilization II*. Fans of the series will find *Planetfall* immediately familiar, as it maintains Triumph's now well-established 'faster 4X' dynamics peppered with *XCOM*-style tactical battles. What *Planetfall* has that's new is a cast of delightful factions that range from hyper-intelligent jellyfish to a species that constantly rebuilds itself from the flesh of its fallen enemies.

For newcomers to the *Age of Wonders* series, the bones of the games will be familiar from the *Civilization* series' vision of the 4X: arrive on the planet, establish a first city, research new technologies, explore and inhabit the surrounding areas, and build up a military force to deal with ambient threats and other players trying to do the same thing. But put aside the hex-based world

map momentarily, and you find that *Age of Wonders: Planetfall* included, shares as much with the classic *Heroes of Might & Magic* series as it does with *Civilization*. Here your

heroes and the armies they command are genuine characters who gain experience, learn new skills, and can bring increasingly lethal equipment to bear on the battlefield. These characters all belong to factions that

have starkly different playstyles, but by building alliances and working with local peoples, it's possible to mix and match units and heroes from across *Planetfall*'s wide menagerie. And because it's an *Age of Wonders* game, that includes battle penguins.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Planetfall's multi-thread story campaign serves as both narrative and mechanical introduction to the factions at play this time around. There's the Vanguard, a human

**Because it's an
Age of Wonders
game, that
includes battle
penguins**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

Turn-based planetary conquest 4X with tactical battles

EXPECT TO PAY

£45

DEVELOPER

Triumph Studios

PUBLISHER

Paradox Interactive

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER

Online, local hotseat, and asynchronous PBEM

LINK

www.aow-planetfall.com

faction that's recently emerged from two centuries in cryogenic sleep after the fall of the Star Union, which by most accounts was a brutal and corrupt hegemony that kept many non-human races in abject subjugation until its collapse. The Vanguard's laser-toting soldiers and helpful drones are the most vanilla and familiar of *Planetfall*'s races. Over the course of the campaign you'll encounter and play as stranger and more exciting factions.

While the Vanguard were fast asleep, other groups were finding their way through the wreckage left from the destruction of the Star Union. There are the Dvar, *Planetfall*'s version of dwarfs, this time sporting gas masks and vaguely Russian accents. The Dvar prefer explosive weapons and mining equipment, and their midgame units can tunnel beneath the battlefield or plow through enemy ranks.

The Kir'Ko are an insectoid race, perhaps the nerdier, more spiritual relatives of the bugs from *Starship Troopers*. They have the standard-issue hardened carapaces and slashing pincers of course, but they're also equipped with a range of psionic abilities that allow them to break enemies' willpower or bolster each other's defences when they stick close together.

With each mission you'll also learn more about *Planetfall*'s surprisingly deep setting. What at first seemed yet another stock-standard sci-fi pretext for dinosaurs with lasers on their heads quickly revealed a world I wanted to learn more about, and whose character backstories drew me forward through each subsequent mission. *Planetfall* flips the script on some long-standing sci-fi tropes in delightful ways. This time, for instance, the Kir'Ko 'bugs' are the victims of generations of human oppression and enslavement, and we get to experience fighting off an infestation in the form of 'sack bleeders' who they can't seem to be

SECRET TECHNOLOGIES *Your faction's hidden bonuses and goals*



SYNTHESIS
Hack enemy mechs and AIs.



CELESTIAN
Psionic-enhanced diplomacy.



VOIDTECH
Manipulate time and space with warp fields.



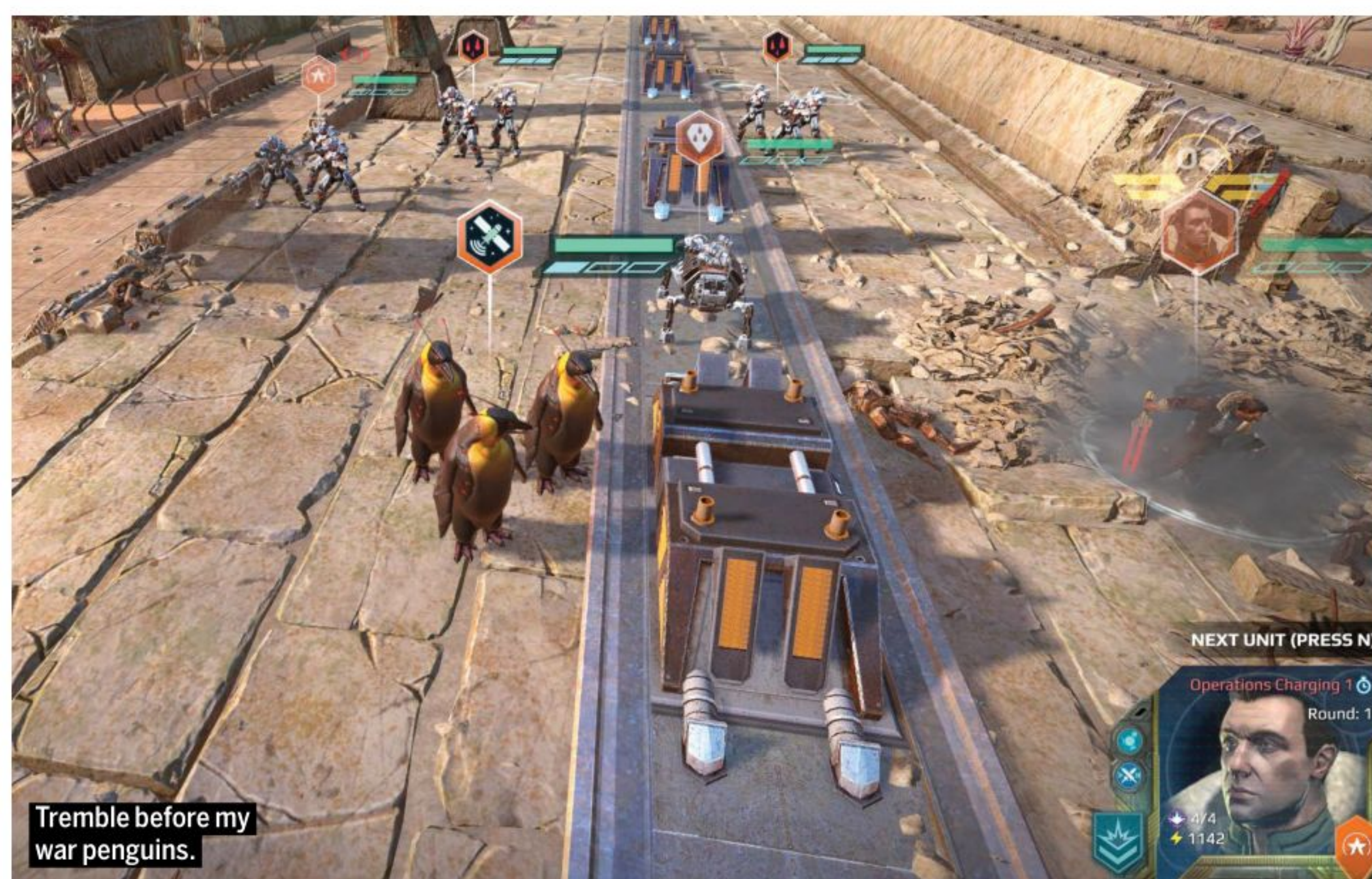
XENOPLAGUE
A boost that provides special units and weapons.



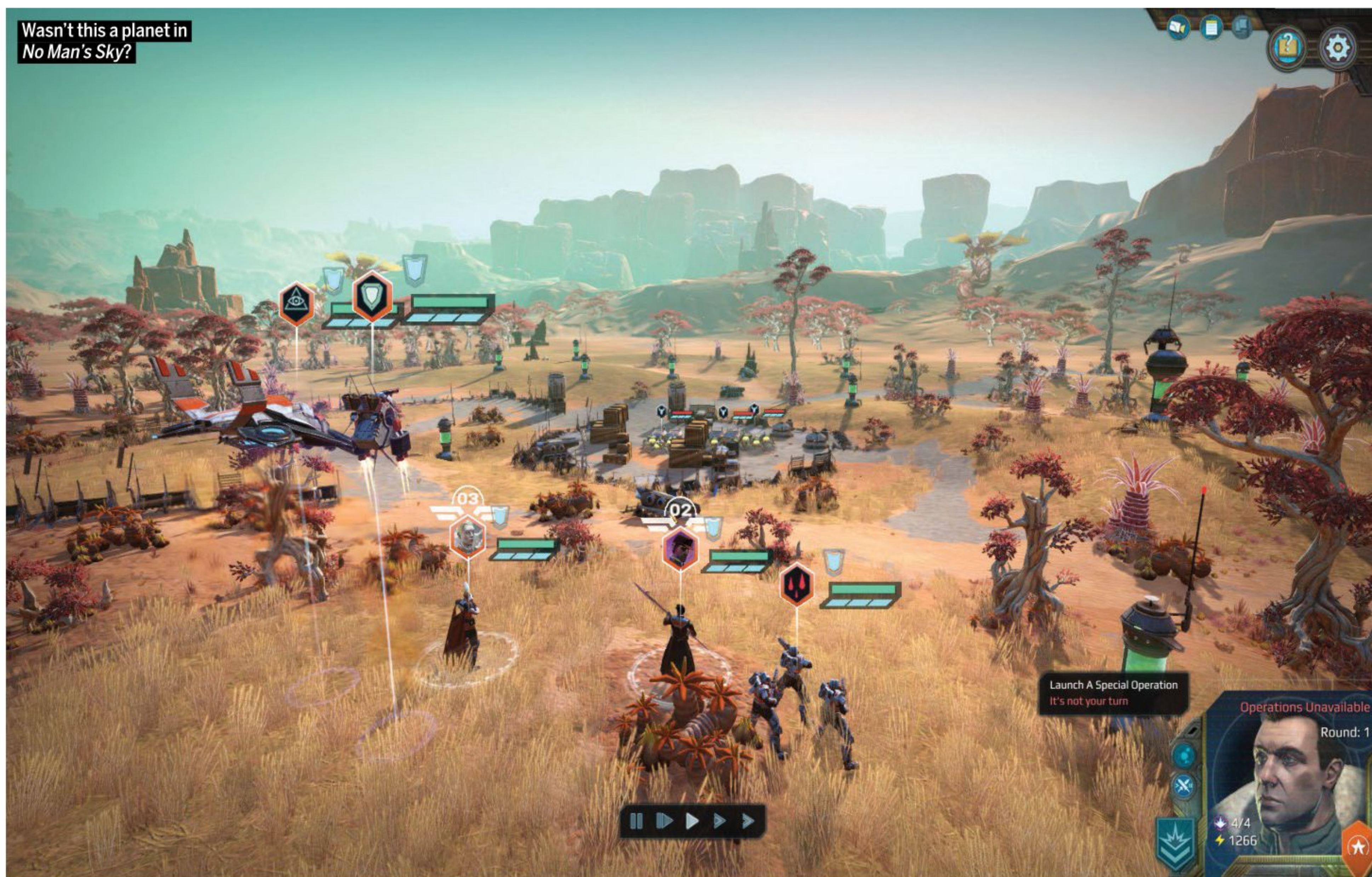
PSYNUMBRA
Use magic to summon extra-dimensional beings.



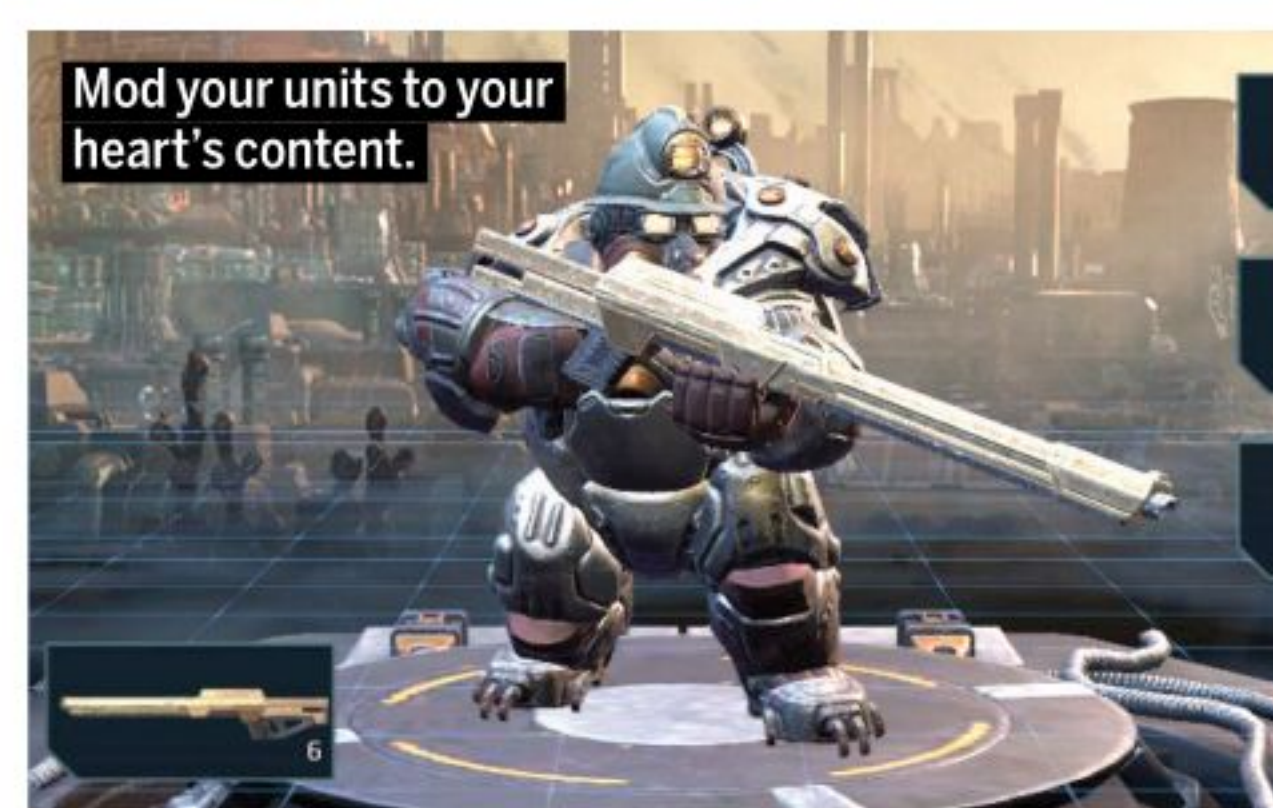
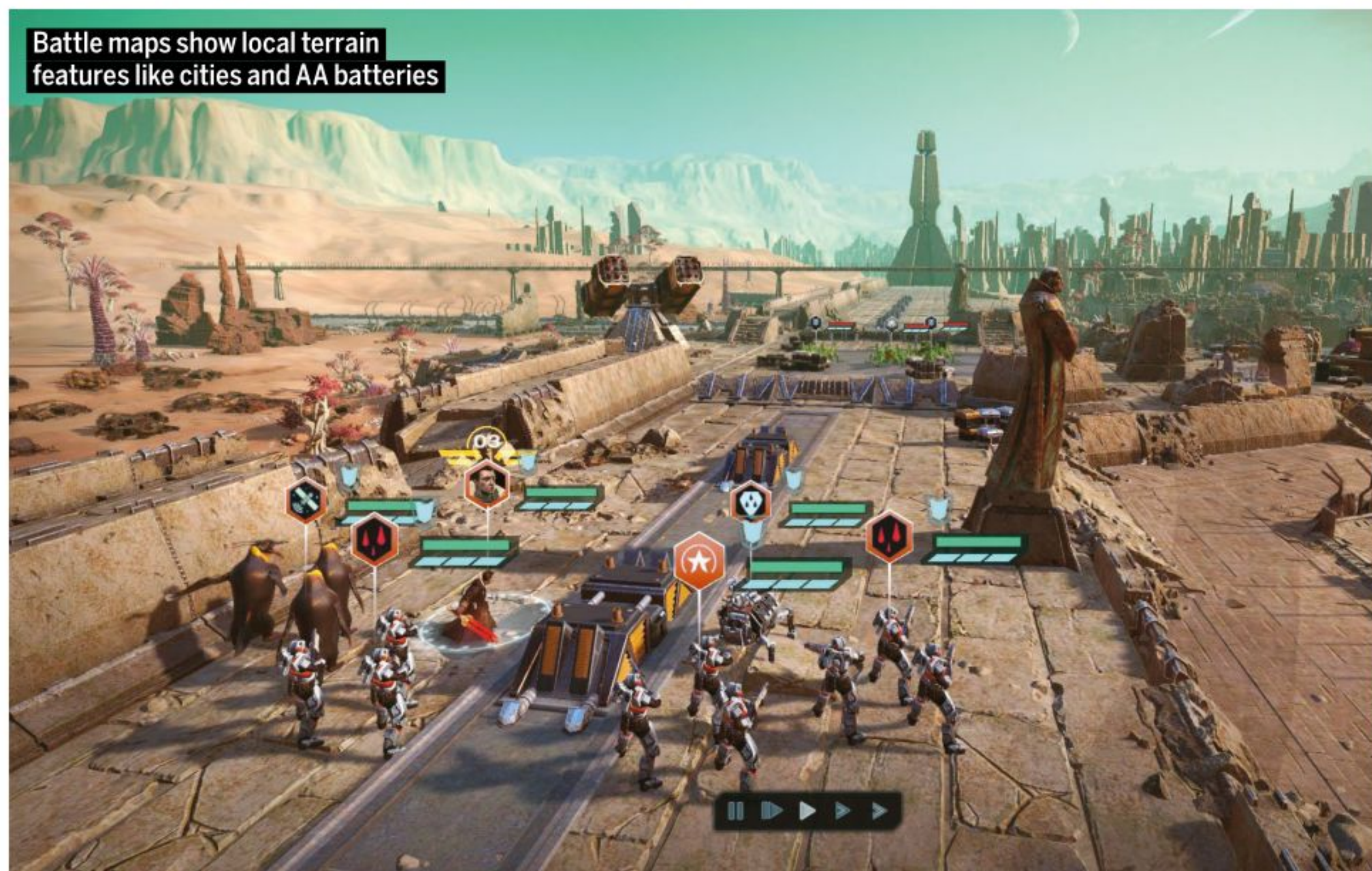
PROMETHIAN
Bring about the apocalypse with weapons of mass destruction.



Wasn't this a planet in *No Man's Sky*?



Battle maps show local terrain features like cities and AA batteries



» rid of no matter how far away they travel in the galaxy.

You'll also encounter several NPC factions scattered across each map. These natives can be either befriended or antagonised depending on your goals for a particular game. They have their own relationships with each other and your competitors. While you can't opt to play as them, building trust will allow you to recruit their unique units, which can include floating jellyfish mind-flayers and the war penguins. There's a splendid array of units available and, as in the old *Heroes of Might & Magic* games, you're free to recruit, mix, and match as you wish, discovering new synergies and technologies along the way.

SPEEDY PACE

More than any other individual element, what keeps *Planetfall* feeling fresh and fun is its relatively brisk pace. Settlements tend to grow quickly, armies zip around the map, and territory is conquered in chunks rather than as a function of gradually bulging borders. Each procedurally-generated world you land on in *Planetfall* has its own pre-defined geography of territories, and you'll take control of these deliberately rather than simply waiting as your population grows into them, per the *Civilization* model.

Each colony will attract citizens as you build improvements, and once you've reached a certain level, you can choose to annex a neighbouring territory. You can still build coloniser units, but these can't be used in adjacent regions. Instead, you need to expand by picking resource-rich nearby areas, waltzing an army in and announcing you're the new lord. This keeps the map-filling early game pleasantly brief, and within a couple dozen turns you'll generally find that most areas have either been snapped up or at least been spoken for. Once this has happened it can take several turns for you to gain control of an enemy's territory, which can make diplomatic options more appealing.

That increase in speed over the traditional 4X extends to most aspects of *Planetfall*. While you're free to fuss over each move in the tactical battles, you can turn control over to the computer at any point, or

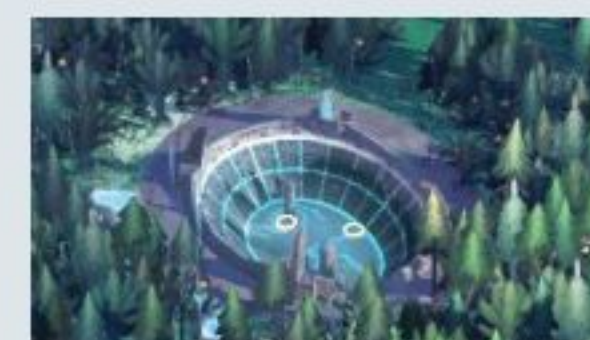
SCOUR THE MAP *Planets are littered with goods left over from the Star Union. Find and use them to give your armies an edge in combat*



Heavy weapons factories give visiting armies a +20 per cent damage bonus for their next combat, and controlling a territory that has one adds to production.



These teleport stations link distant parts of the map, and can be used provide unexpected approach paths for your attacking armies.



Take in a concert at a Stadium Arcadium to give your army a morale boost, or capture one to increase happiness in your domain.



Paragon Inc repair stations will fully heal any army that stops by, and provide a boost to production if you own the territory.

have the AI adjudicate them altogether if the odds are wildly uneven or you aren't interested in that layer of the game. That would be a shame though, because *Planetfall*'s tight tactics battles are a treat, and they quickly become much deeper than they first appear.

CLEVER GIRL

Each unit on *Planetfall*'s hex-based strategic map is actually an army that can hold up to six units, which then duke it out on three-dimensional maps when the conversation goes south. When I first encountered these an *Age of Wonders* or two ago, I made the mistake of thinking they

were a fun but simplified version of *XCOM*'s tactics battles. I was delighted to learn I was wrong then, and *Planetfall*'s broad array of units, weapons, and status effects means battles are even more varied this time

around. The battle maps themselves are lovely to look at and as varied as the planetary terrain where they unfold. There are bombed-out highways, jungle temples, industrial parks, and snow-covered alpine landscapes. Some maps are littered with spiny black shards and dimensional rifts.

Perhaps you've levelled up a captain with perks like Ranged Expert and Deadeye, and given her a sniper rifle that shoots extra-dimensional void projectiles. You can perch her up on an embankment overlooking the gully where your Kir'Ko rivals are bound to flood in, while you send in troopers with laser rifles and set them to overwatch for when the bugs inevitably rush to melee range. Or perhaps you have a

Dvar hero with the piloting and juggernaut perk. Pop him into hulking excavator tank and tunnel underneath your foes while your Trencher line units pop up fortifications along the line. Every unit, penguins included, can be outfitted with custom modules that you can research or discover.

There are a couple space flies in *Planetfall*'s space ointment, and one of those is that information you need can be strangely difficult to find at first. Figuring out what various combat status effects actually mean in terms of gameplay can be puzzling, and the in-game Codex isn't always helpful. It can be annoying to figure out what to click in order to bring up key information about a territory you're considering annexing, and the research tree is initially opaque.

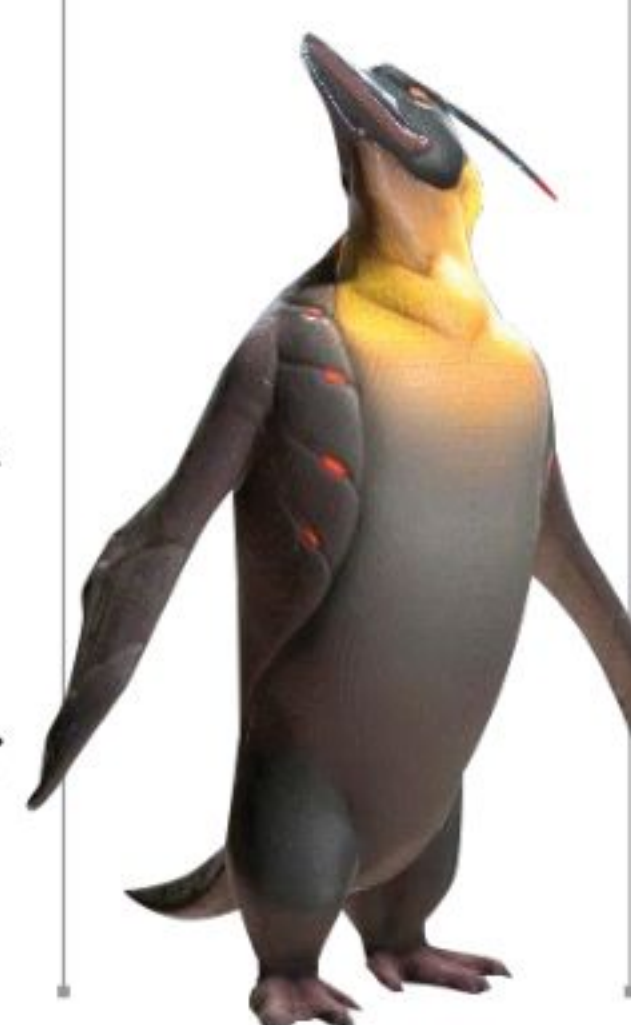
It took me a few games before I had a firm notion of what I tech I wanted or needed, and those change for each faction. While the tutorials throw a lot of information at you at first, it's sparse in a few areas where *Age of Wonders* departs from the *Civilization* template.

My complaints, though, are minor. *Age of Wonders: Planetfall* offers not only a welcome change of scenery from the fantasy landscapes of its forebears, it manages to use its sci-fi setting imaginatively and meaningfully. With a fun story campaign and highly granular customisation options for one-off scenarios, there's plenty here into which to sink your teeth – or mandibles, as the case may be. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Age of Wonders: Planetfall, while a bit opaque in some areas, is the most entertaining 4X I've played in years.

85



TRUCKED OUT

FIA EUROPEAN TRUCK RACING CHAMPIONSHIP
is exactly what you think it is. *By Andy Kelly*

Before you even think about entering a race in *European Truck Racing Championship's* career mode, you need a licence. Earning one involves a series of challenges designed to teach you the basics of navigating one of these weighty monsters around a track without overheating, oversteering, or toppling over. And it's worth paying close attention to these tests, because this is very different from other racing games.

If you're used to playing more traditional racing sims such as *Forza*, where you can slam the handbrake and drift effortlessly around a corner, you'll have some adjusting to do. These trucks will spin out at the slightest provocation and my first hour of the game was spent misjudging corners and twirling to an embarrassing standstill.

And then you have the wellbeing of your brakes to consider, a layer of micromanagement that really sets *European Truck Racing Championship* apart from other racing games. When you hit the brakes to turn a corner, a temperature indicator on the HUD will shoot up. Stopping a vehicle this heavy generates a lot of heat, which you must counter by spraying the brakes with cold water. This is as simple as pressing a button, but the mastery lies in the balance.

If your brakes get too hot or too cold their performance will take a severe hit. But you can't just hammer the water button constantly, because you run the risk of the temperature

dipping too low. Also, your water supply is limited. So every time you turn a corner in a race you have to consider your brakes, and it's easy to forget about them as your focus shifts to hitting an apex or squeezing past a flock of other racers.

You're at war with your truck and its screeching brakes

These hefty trucks also take a lifetime to slow down, especially when you've built up a lot of speed. This means you have to train yourself to know exactly when to start braking for a corner.

You can, however, task the computer with managing your brakes and other functions. *European Truck Racing Championship* is nicely customisable, with a range of assists to tweak things to your specific tastes.

There's a constant feeling that these vehicles were never designed to be raced, and that you're almost fighting against them. And that's an aspect of the game I really like. You're at war with your truck and its screeching, temperamental brakes, which makes managing to cross the finish line in a respectable position hugely satisfying. I also like how the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A racing game, with trucks

EXPECT TO PAY

£35

DEVELOPER

N-RACING

PUBLISHER

Bigben Interactive

REVIEWED ON

GTX 1080, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Online, local

LINK

www.bigben-interactive.co.uk

AI makes mistakes, spinning out and receiving time penalties for cutting corners just like you do.

The problem is, there isn't much to *European Truck Racing Championship*. This is a supremely bare bones racing game, and there's a general flatness to everything that makes it difficult to love. It reminds me of the *Gran Turismo* series with its cold, almost clinical feel. It's visually crisp, with some impressively detailed truck models, but the tracks are lifeless and muted and the menus are functional but drab, accompanied by a dreary generic rock soundtrack.

Games like *Forza* and *Dirt* are all about revelling in the passion of motorsport. They want you to be excited about it, and it's infectious, even if you don't really care about cars all that much. In comparison, *ETRC* is a charmless experience. Your career is little more than a series of long, increasingly boring races, and if you don't really love the core driving your attention will quickly wander. Although things do get a touch more exciting when you reach the World Series Tour, which lets you drive a new type of truck that's faster.

HOT AND COLD

European Truck Racing Championship is, in some ways, one of the most unique racing games on PC. The temperature management system adds an interesting layer of strategy to each race, and there's a novelty in heaving one of these massive, twitchy trucks around a racing track. It's just a shame the overall package is so dry. A little personality goes a long way, especially in racing simulators. But if you're really yearning for an alternative to racing cars, or you find *Euro Truck Simulator 2* too slow-paced, this might be worth a look. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Those trucks are an interesting challenge to drive, but this is ultimately a lightweight, slightly charmless sim.

66

HOT WHEELS Two flavours of truck

EUROPEAN TRUCK RACING CHAMPIONSHIP

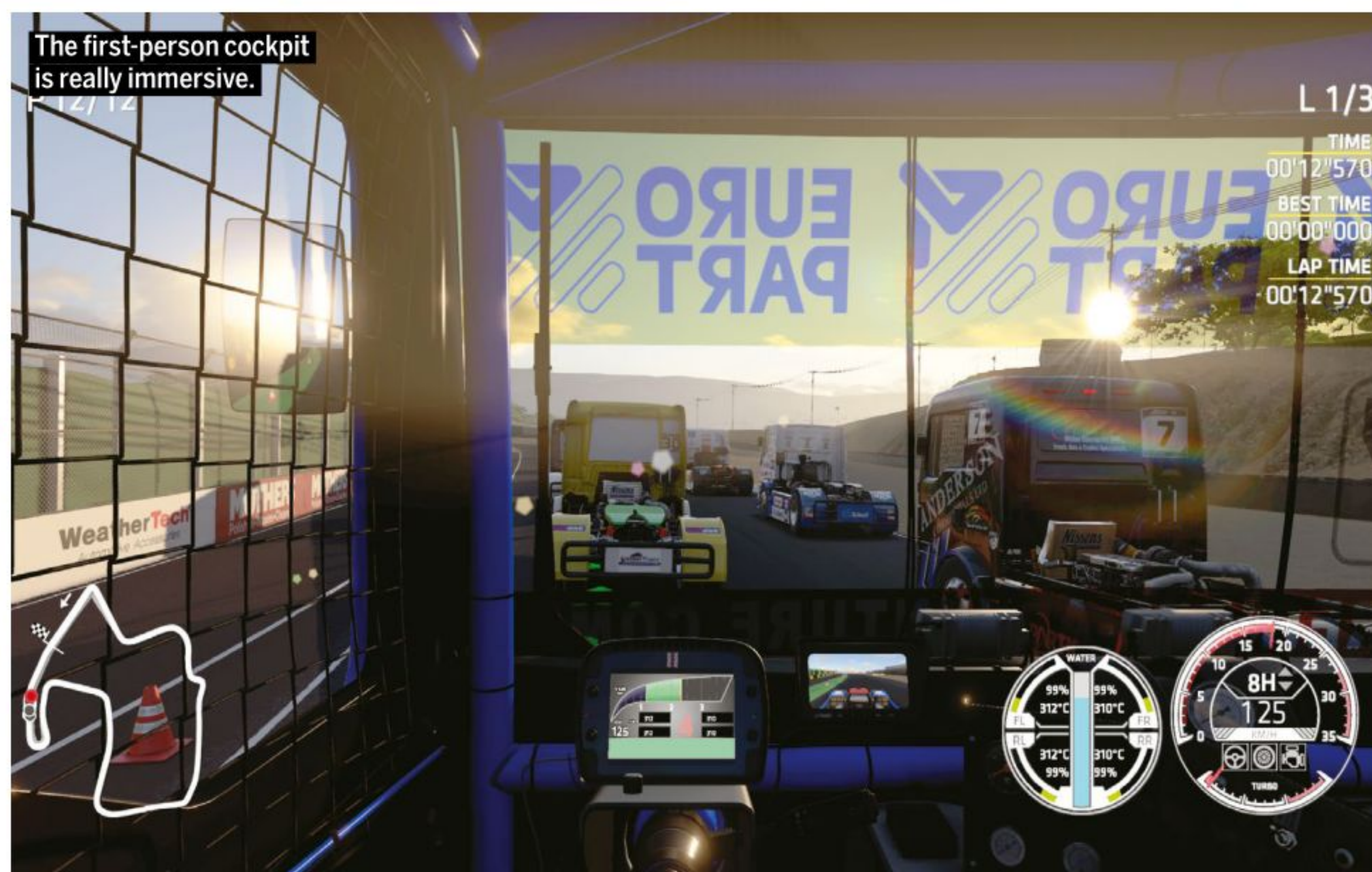


The standard truck variant, based on the real-world championship of the same name. These bulky trucks are tuned to turn corners in races, but their brakes heat up easily.

WORLD TOUR SERIES



This championship was created for the game. It features a range of trucks that accelerate faster than their ETRC counterparts, but aren't as easy to manoeuvre.



ASPHALT JUNGLE

In **NIGHT CALL**, a taxi driver's knowledge of his passengers is the key to solving a murder. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

Being in a taxi can be a strangely intimate experience for both driver and passenger, and *Night Call* seeks to explore that relationship. You play a Parisian driver who has all kinds of conversations with his passengers. However, you're not just making conversation to pass the time. An encounter with a serial killer leaves you scarred, but also implicated. In order to prove you're a victim, not the perp, you need to identify the real criminal.

This set-up is just as film noir-inspired as *Night Call*'s moodily gorgeous visual design, the implication here being that the police aren't as interested in the truth as they are in having a scapegoat. Unless you make a valuable

contribution, you're going down. It's an idea that doesn't gel well with an otherwise very modern tone. You have no choice, and so you use your night job as a way to make progress with your new

detective side hustle – choosing a waiting passenger on a map of Paris and probing them for information as you take them where they want to go.

Passengers might drop clues – gossip or a location worth checking out – based on how the conversation is going and whether they actually know anything. After your shift you then spend some time going through your clues and assigning them to a suspect until you can identify the murderer with certainty.

MIDNIGHT IN PARIS

I'll be absolutely honest, throughout several runs I haven't guessed correctly once, and it was guesswork rather than an investigation. *Night Call* comes with three different case

types, one in which the suspects share a possible motive, one where their connections to the murders are more arbitrary, and one called 'random' that feels no more or less so than the others, but all

modes play the same. In each, the killer is randomly picked from five possible characters.

I'm certain it would help if I knew more about the killer than single-sentence descriptions of his approach, but as it is, *Night Call* feels like doing a puzzle without having seen the picture on the box first. I can't tell which evidence isn't related if no one tells me which is, and so I end up guessing, which isn't satisfying in the least.

Exchanges range from brilliantly poignant to groan-worthy

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A narrative noir mystery set in a taxi

EXPECT TO PAY

£15.49

DEVELOPER

Monkey Moon/
BlackMuffin Studio

PUBLISHER

Raw Fury

REVIEWED ON

Core i5-8400, GTX
1060, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

www.nightcall-game.com

Refusing a passenger is largely pointless, unless you're worried you're going to run out of petrol by the time you reach their destination. You don't know what you're looking for, so you don't know if a conversation with a specific passenger will lead you to it, so why refuse them? At least you can see the passengers nearby and make somewhat of a pick based on who looks interesting or if someone you suspect is among those looking for a ride. I'm picking based on these attributes since I don't know who I'm looking for – clues that don't come from locations I've visited mostly seem to be dispensed at random.

Thankfully the whole murder plot mostly seems to exist to give *Night Call* an end state, and doesn't detract from the real meat of the game, which is having conversations with an eclectic cast of passengers. While the descriptive text is always wonderful, the exchanges range from brilliantly poignant to groan-worthy, the latter mostly because *Night Call* also tends to reach for that poignancy without having anything to add.

One of your passengers, for example, looks similar to you. When you meet him he's had a run-in with the police, but he's actually a deeply sensitive lover of literature who bonds with you over shared experiences with racism. "People of colour have diverse interests, too" isn't a point worth making in 2019. With 70 characters, there's a lot of variety, but unfortunately there's also a lot of repetition between the procedurally generated runs.

Night Call is to be commended for effort and the joy evident in designing so many stories, but less would have been more in order to allow for tighter gameplay. ■

WHERE TO? A few of my favourite passengers



SHINJI KURAMA

I was treated to some Japanese chat with Shinji.



SONNY TALPA

Sonny here thinks that you're just such a swell guy.



CAROLINA JARREAU

She has money and gives shelter to those in need.



CROUKY

Crouky has had enough. Crouky is leaving. The curmudgeonly cat.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Haphazard gameplay and varying narrative quality put a damper on *Night Call*'s strong mood and hints of brilliance.

65

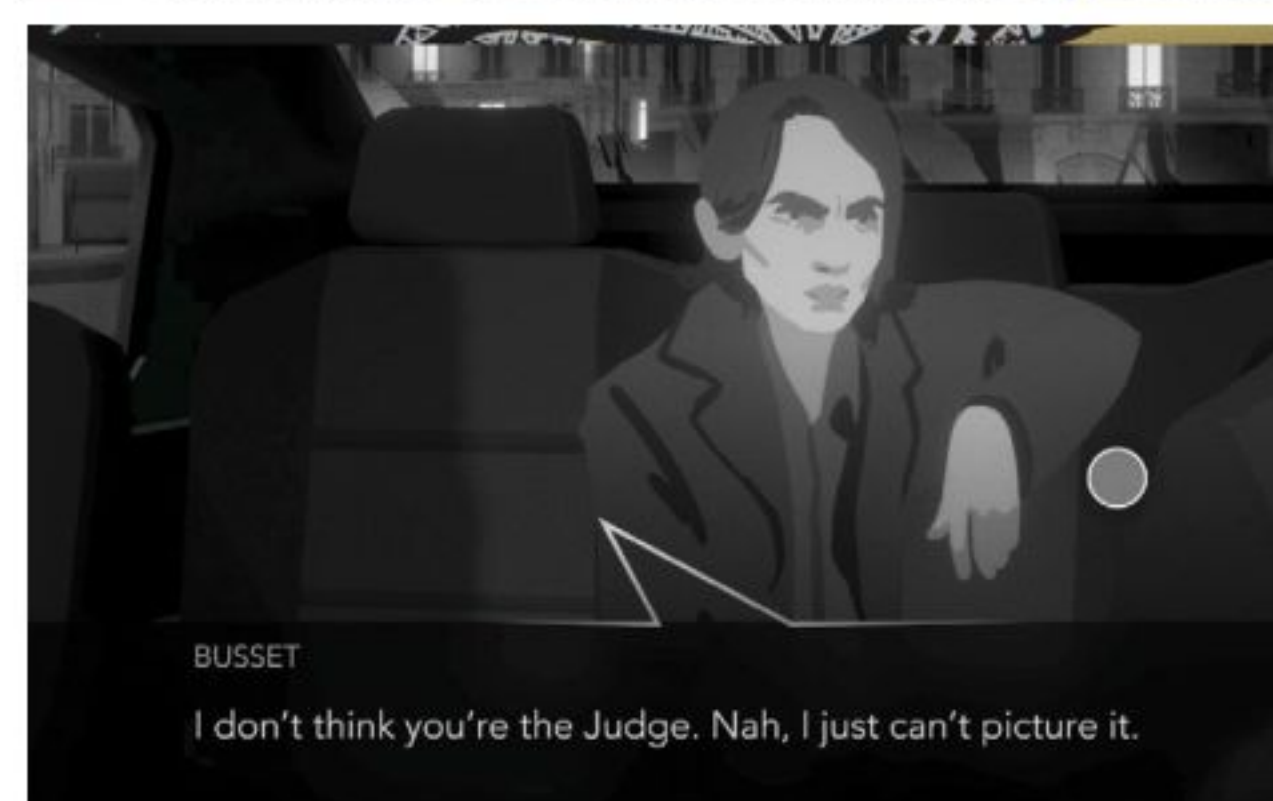
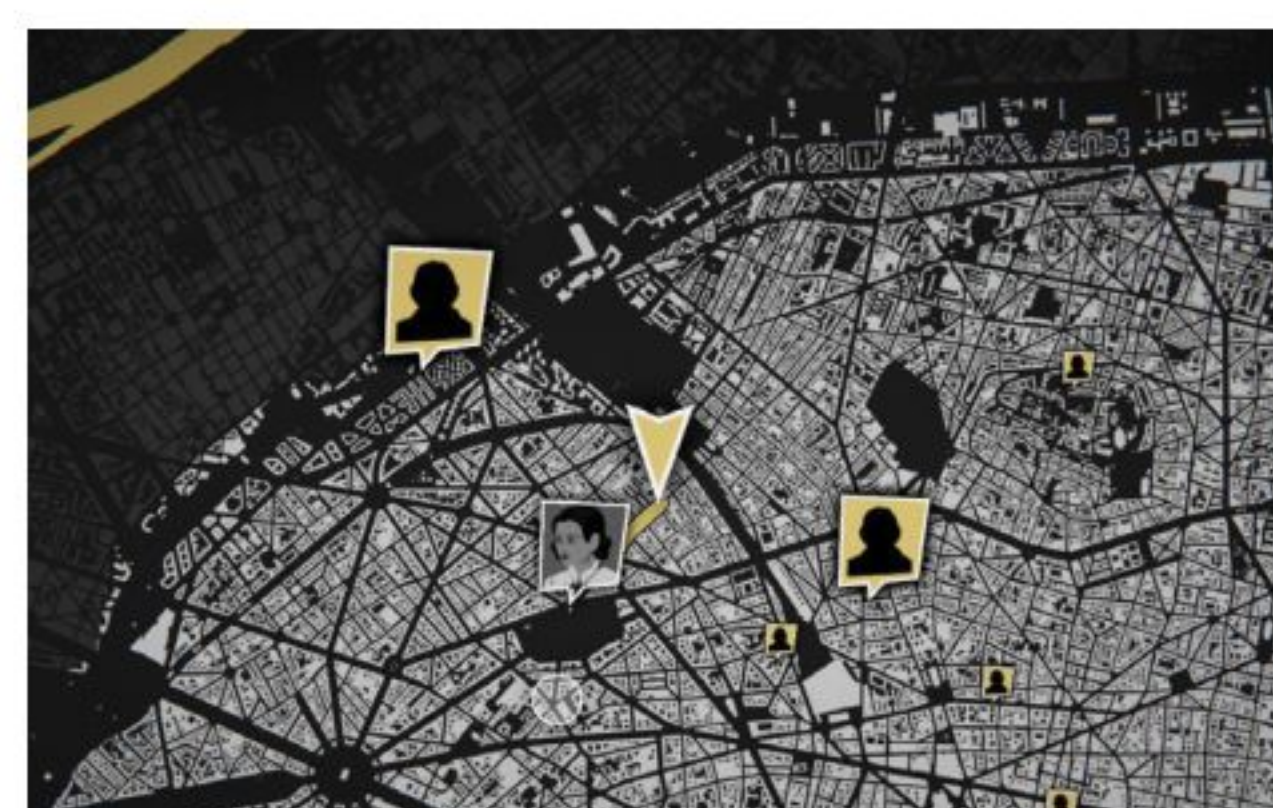
Videogames are art,
didn't you know?

ANNABELLE

I even played a video game about refugees... Beautifully done.
Really powerful.

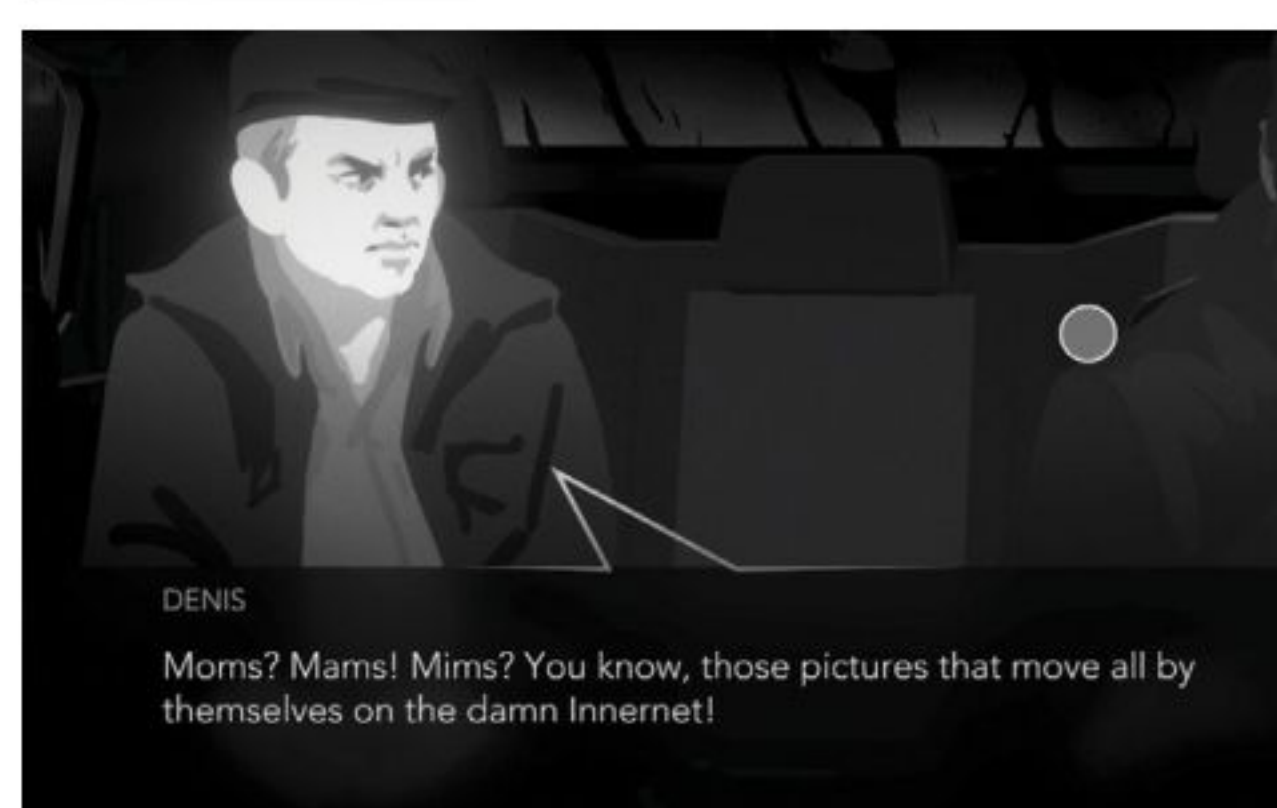
Here you get petrol, a newspaper
or scratch cards for extra cash.

You pull over and stop at a gas station.



BUSSET

I don't think you're the Judge. Nah, I just can't picture it.



DENIS

Moms? Mams! Mims? You know, those pictures that move all by
themselves on the damn Internet!



Refuse Santa at
your own peril.

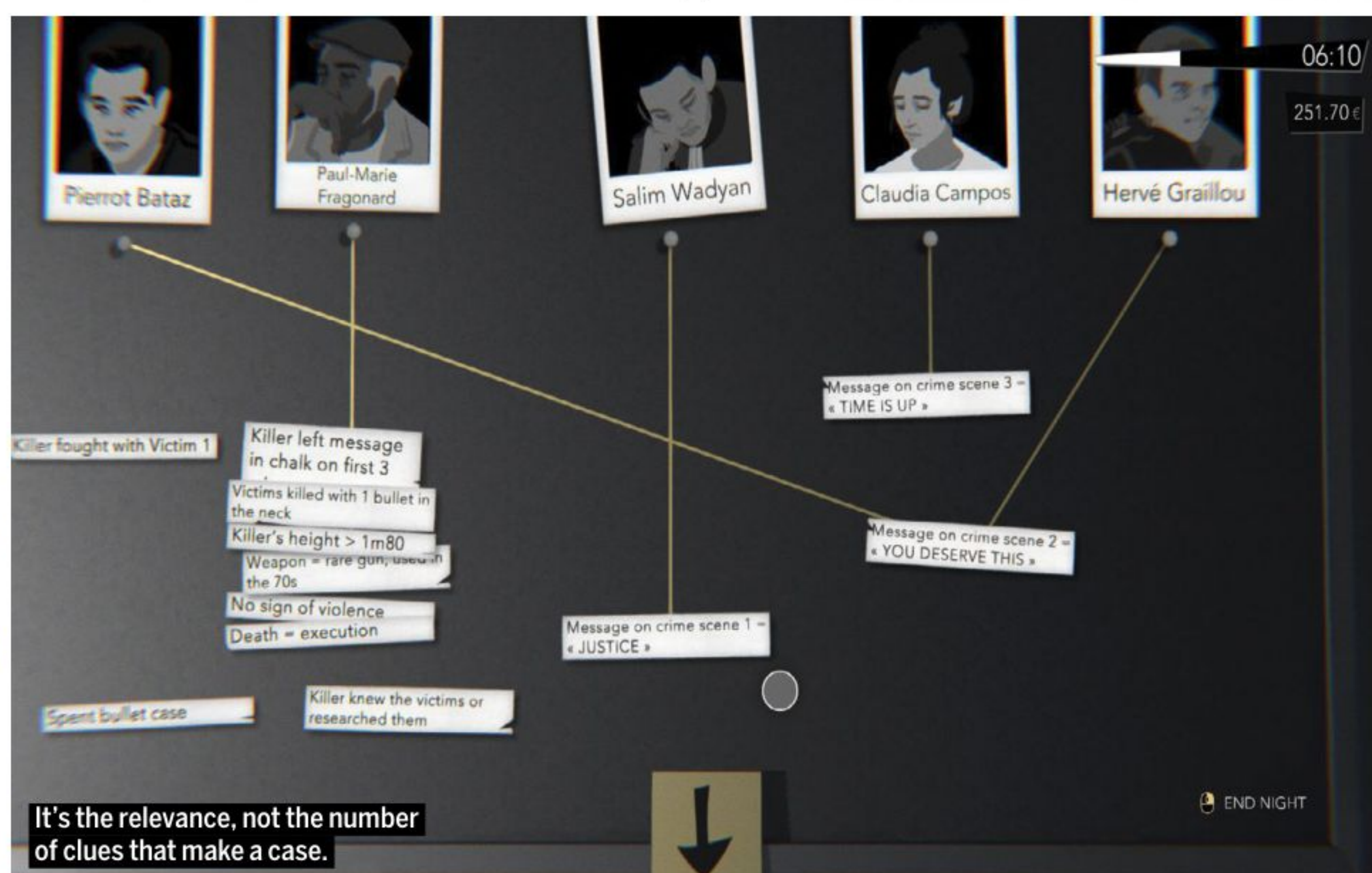
Santa

« Champs-Élysées... I think...
yeah... »

Distance 8.68 km

Fare 22.57 €

ACCEPT REFUSE



HEART OF DARKNESS

FINAL FANTASY XIV: SHADOWBRINGERS is an emotionally-charged and cathartic climax. *By Steven Messner*

Final Fantasy XIV used to be my favourite MMO that I hated to recommend. Playing it requires an enormous investment of time – at least a few hundred hours to get caught up – and even though I love it, I worried that others might ultimately find that long journey boring and unsatisfying. But after beating Final Fantasy XIV's latest expansion, those worries are gone.

Shadowbringers is the Avengers: Endgame of Final Fantasy XIV, an emotionally stirring climax that draws on six years of character development, storytelling, and worldbuilding to weave an epic, dimension-spanning story rooted in the relationships of its chief characters.

If you're not familiar with Final Fantasy XIV's story, it's difficult to describe Shadowbringers' premise without spoiling everything that comes before. With three expansions and hundreds of hours of story under its belt, the world of Final Fantasy XIV is so complicated and nuanced you should be able to get a degree in its history. It's intimidating to newcomers – especially because the first part of the game's overarching narrative is a slow burn – but as a long-time player I love how rich and vast the world and its characters have become.

The gist is that, after the events of Stormblood, the world of Hydaelyn is

on the precipice of an apocalyptic war orchestrated by the evil Ascians, immortal beings who want to plunge the world into chaos as a means to revive their dark god. To help tip the first domino, the Ascians are hoping to cause an apocalypse in an alternate

Ascians are hoping to cause an apocalypse in an alternate dimension

dimension that'll cascade into Hydaelyn, so my companions and I have to adventure to this parallel world, called The First, to save it and in turn save Hydaelyn. It's exactly the sort of plot you'd expect from the likes of

Brainiac, Dr Doom, or Thanos, only wrapped up in an anime-inspired high-fantasy aesthetic.

While Hydaelyn is constantly under siege by the forces of darkness, The First has the opposite problem – a century earlier the darkness was defeated, accidentally giving rise to an abundance of primordial light that has almost wiped out the entire planet and spawned an army of divine monsters called Sin Eaters. To save The First, I have to swap sides

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A bleak and story-heavy expansion to Square Enix's great MMO

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Core i7-8700, 32GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER
MMO

LINK
<https://eu.finalfantasyxiv.com/shadowbringers>



and become the Warrior of Darkness, as part of a quest that explores the setting's primal opposing powers in more complex terms than simply 'good' and 'evil'.

It's hard to do the story justice in so few words or without spoiling its best surprises, but Shadowbringers' success is, in part, owed to the way Square Enix has carefully built the world of Final Fantasy XIV over these past six years. Though previous expansions have always been a direct continuation of the main story, the scope of Shadowbringers is almost dizzying by comparison. Characters, lore, and story beats that have been left to simmer for years suddenly boil over in dramatic narrative twists and turns that make this 50-hour journey an absolute rollercoaster. When the hero Arbert first appeared all the way back in Heavensward as a minor character, for example, I never could have imagined what a central role he would come to play in Shadowbringers. But it's these long and meandering character arcs that make my adventures feel so epic.

FETCH ME A QUEST

Despite being an MMO expansion, Shadowbringers does a remarkable job of emulating that golden era of JRPGs through well-written dialogue and evocative cutscenes. If you hate fetch quests in MMOs, Shadowbringers unfortunately has those in spades, but I hardly cared because the context of those quests – and the cutscenes that often followed – were so enticing.

The writing and voice acting has been steadily improving since A Realm Reborn, but the bleakness of Shadowbringers casts the drama in a much more mature, and at times disturbing, new light. One early quest led me to a sanatorium full of people who had been infected with the light and, in time, would turn into Sin Eaters. Without a cure, the caretakers' only option was to delay the inevitable and then euthanise them. Elsewhere, the city Eulmore is

ON THE JOB TRAINING Shadowbringers introduces two new jobs to play. Here's what they're all about



DANCER

This ranged damage-dealing class wields two chakrams that they throw at enemies like boomerangs, and can perform dances by using 'step abilities' in a specific order to buff allies.



GUNBREAKER

Gunbreakers are tanks that use magical ammo to empower their slashing attacks. They can reduce their HP to one but become invincible for a short time, making them powerful defenders.

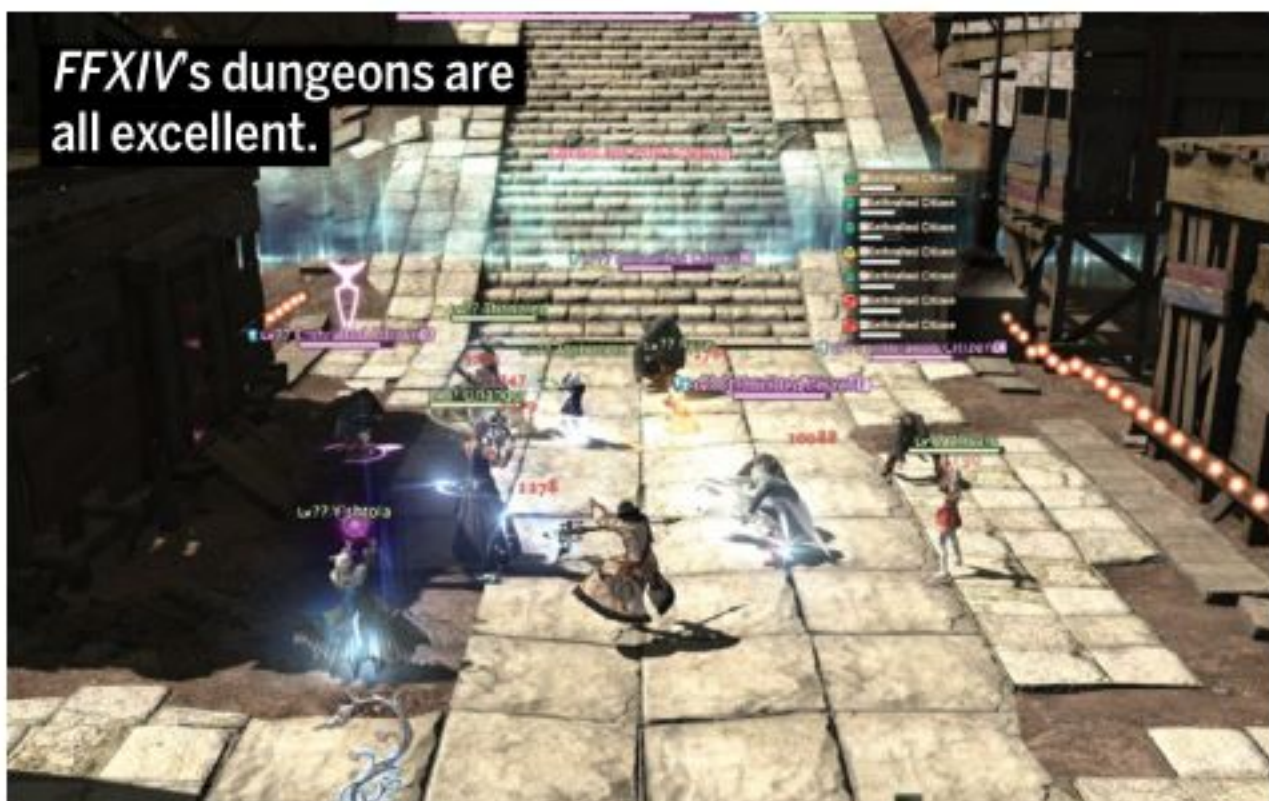
Shadowbringers is like a grade-A anime.



I don't think we're in The First anymore, Toto.



FFXIV's dungeons are all excellent.



Black Mages still have the best spell effects.



I can't believe she's evil.



Cutscenes often get emotional.



» full of upper-class elite living in excess as they wait for the apocalypse while, just outside the walls, the poor, sick, and starving waste away.

Shadowbringers addresses these heavy subjects well in the face of *Final Fantasy*'s extensive melodrama, but my favourite part of the story is how much depth and growth it adds to my cast of longtime companions. Thancred's story is especially gut-wrenching and brings a bittersweet end to one of *FFXIV*'s longest character arcs.

But even that doesn't compare to *Shadowbringers*' best ploy: having the MMO's grand villain, Emet-Selch, tag along for most of the adventure. Few stories ever manage to make me sympathise with a villain while still retaining what makes them detestable, but Emet-Selch could easily be the best nemesis of any *Final Fantasy* game since *FFVII*'s Kefka. He's totally evil, but at the same time so charismatic that I wish we didn't have to be enemies.

It's with Emet-Selch and the story's third act that *Shadowbringers* pulls out every stop, throwing wide the gates on some of the *FFXIV*'s biggest unanswered questions about the origins of the universe and the nature of the conflict with the Ascians, while simultaneously casting a light on Emet-Selch's heartbreaking motivations for being so damn evil. Without spoiling too much, it's one of the most dramatic and audacious conclusions I've played in any RPG.

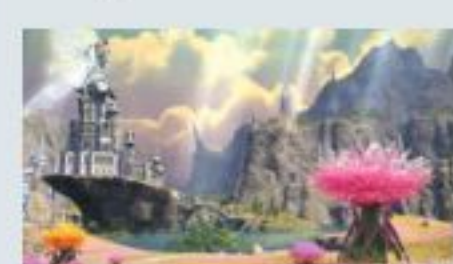
BLACK IN ACTION

Though its story is the best reason to play, *Shadowbringers* adds a lot of other neat features. The new Gunbreaker and Dancer classes are both good fun, each boasting a distinct playstyle, and the new bunny-like Vi and tiger-esque Hrothgar character races feel like natural additions to the world.

These features are less exciting only because they so closely follow the same template that Square Enix has laid out since *Heavensward*. Instead of overhauling the game's core systems with each expansion, as *World of Warcraft* does, *Final Fantasy XIV* tends to play it safe. While that makes the addition of new classes, raids, and other features feel somewhat predictable, it's hard to

ZONES OF THE FIRST

Shadowbringers adds six new zones to explore in the country of Norvrandt



1 IL MHEG
A fairyland full of Irish-accented pixies, talking dog-people, and one very nefarious frog who tries to drown you.



2 KHOLUSIA
This barren coast is where the last vestiges of nobility have gathered to wait out the apocalypse in luxury.



3 THE RAK'TIKA GREATWOOD
This ancient forest houses two warring religious sects that each worship the darkness.



4 LAKELAND
Beyond the violet forests of Lakeland is the Crystarium, a free city built at the base of a mysterious crystal.



5 AMH ARAENG
A desert wasteland flanked by a crystalline wave of light that almost obliterated the whole of Norvrandt.



6 ???
One very special surprise area that, for long-time *FFXIV* fans, shines a light on some of its biggest mysteries.

A dreamland ruled over by a top-hat wearing frog spirit

mind too much since everything is so consistently good and fun – especially the new dungeons, which are some of my absolute favourites out of any expansion so far.

Part of that is due to how the story tees up each dungeon and single-boss raid (called Trials) so well, turning every one into a climactic finale for

its zone-specific questline. After spending so long in the barren, gritty deserts of *Stormblood*, the dungeons and vibrant forests of *Shadowbringers* are a visual feast.

Il Mheg and its accompanying dungeon of Dohn Mheg are my two favourites. The first is an entire area stripped straight out of *The Dark Crystal*, an enchanting land full of playful sprites and a colony of talking dog-birds ruled over

by a fairy king who also happens to be a Sin Eater. To supplant her, I had to complete the dungeon of Dohn Mheg, a vibrant dreamland ruled over by a top-hat wearing frog spirit.

It's unlike anything else in *Final Fantasy XIV*, but instead of clashing with the bleak story of *Shadowbringers*' other areas, it ends up being a welcome and cheerful reprieve capped off with a gruelling battle against the warped king. *Shadowbringers* continues *FFXIV*'s legacy for astounding music and flashy spell effects that make each boss fight memorable and thrilling.

If there's one area that *Final Fantasy XIV* is struggling with it's in class balance and design. *Shadowbringers* reworked nearly every class, pruning old abilities while also adding some new ones. Most of the damage-dealing classes are improved by these changes, but as a White Mage it's disappointing to see some of my favourite spells taken away and replaced with a new healing system that doesn't add any complexity to combat. Instead, I'm just waiting for a meter to slowly fill so I can cast the associated spell.

That isn't to say combat in *Shadowbringers* isn't fun, though. The new raid bosses are still the best in the genre, demanding excellent team coordination while delivering an explosive spectacle that makes each fight feel tense and exciting.

EXPANSION BRINGERS

Since *Final Fantasy XIV* relaunched, Square Enix has also kept up a good tempo of major updates every three or four months, and assuming *Shadowbringers* continues that template I'm excited to see how the story and world continues to expand. But its main story is so good that this expansion is worth playing even if you have no intention of committing to hundreds more hours of grinding raid bosses for loot drops. *Final Fantasy XIV* is quietly one of the best games in the series, but *Shadowbringers* elevates it even further by telling a bleak and heartfelt story that generously rewards the investment made by its most hardcore fans. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Shadowbringers' poignant and character-driven story is one of the best in the entire *Final Fantasy* series.

94

HEAVY RAIN

A shady detective investigates a series of ritualistic murders in **DRY DROWNING**, a sci-fi visual novel with a weird name. *By Andy Kelly*

The city of Nova Polemos was once a bastion of hope and freedom, where displaced people looking for somewhere to call home would be welcomed with open arms. But following an economic collapse a fascist political party, the Black Bands, comes into power. The group preys on people's nostalgia for more prosperous times, closing the city walls, halting immigration.

Dry Drowning is a sci-fi visual novel set on the moody streets of Nova Polemos. A serial killer is on the loose, whose murders are themed around Greek myths. And you, a shady private detective named Mordred Foley, find yourself on the murderer's tail.

The political turmoil troubling Nova Polemos, and the anti-immigration rhetoric of its despotic rulers, are of course a not-so-subtle nod to the current state of the world. *Dry Drowning* is, unashamedly, a politically charged game, using its dystopian vision of the future to hold a mirror up to our own society. And I'm glad, because cyberpunk with nothing to say always feels superficial.

Being a visual novel, *Dry Drowning* is heavy on dialogue. You spend the majority of the time clicking through lines of text. The story is interesting and the world-building is intriguing, but the dialogue comes across as unnatural and awkward. I was distracted by odd turns of phrase – likely a result of

English not being Italian developer Studio V's first language.

But it's not all talking, occasionally there's a crime scene to investigate, someone to interrogate, or other detecting to do. Crime scenes are fairly standard point-and-click fare.

You move your cursor around the screen, hunting for clues. Then when you've located them all the next piece of story triggers.

Interrogations, however, are more interesting. When someone isn't telling

the truth, a sinister animal mask appears on them: a creepy visualisation of Foley's knack for sniffing out liars. In this so-called Living Nightmare mode you have to present evidence to catch the suspect out. Get it wrong three times and it's game over, and it's possible to initiate these interrogations even if you haven't found all the evidence.

REACTIVE MOMENTS

Dry Drowning is a stylish game, using evocative hand-painted backgrounds to establish its setting. Some of the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A detective adventure set in a dystopian future

EXPECT TO PAY
£18

DEVELOPER
Studio V

PUBLISHER
VLG Publishing

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.vlgpublishing.com

art feels amateurish and the character animation is simplistic, but the rainy, downbeat atmosphere is pretty absorbing. Tasteful ambient music also helps evoke the mood of each scene, and while the production values aren't exactly lavish, a lot of care has gone into its look and feel.

There's a decent amount of reactivity too. Whenever you make a choice or say something that will impact the story later on, it's clearly flagged. This is pretty gamey, but I don't mind it because it makes it obvious which story beats are important. If these reactive moments were opaque, you wouldn't know how you were shaping the story. Foley will also comment on your choices in his thoughts, hinting at what consequences they could have.

If you struggle with visual novels, *Dry Drowning* probably won't change your mind about them.

It definitely has some neat ideas, particularly the interrogation system. But it's still a largely passive experience. You sit back, click through the dialogue, and watch the story unfold. I never felt completely connected to what was happening on screen, but to be honest, I get that with every visual novel I play.

The futuristic setting might sway you, though. *Dry Drowning's* world is its most compelling asset, and it does a fine job of building a cyberpunk setting that is more than just neon, rain, and pollution-spewing Blade Runner skylines. But I would have loved the game itself a lot more if the dialogue felt more natural, the animation was richer, and the detecting was more involved.

There are better cyberpunk games, and better detective games, on PC, but *Dry Drowning* takes a confident stab at both. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An atmospheric visual novel set in an evocative world, with a neat interrogation system and some iffy dialogue.

67

Being a visual novel, *Dry Drowning* is heavy on dialogue

CASE FILES Key players in *Dry Drowning's* story



MORDRED FOLEY

A private detective who falsified evidence in a high profile serial killer case, sending two innocent men to the electric chair.



JULIE WARD

Advisor to Richard Baker, a Black Bands bigwig who has been accused of murder. She hires you to clear her employer's name.



HERA KAIRIS

Foley's assistant. An immigrant who arrived in Nova Polemos before the city was closed off. She hates the Black Bands.



FREYA GOLDSOUL

A cop who quickly rose in the ranks. She arrested Foley for his evidence tampering and is furious he got away with it.

You're often tested to see if you're paying attention.



He didn't have enough time

He didn't have the sufficient skills

He didn't have any motive

Hera is Foley's loyal assistant.

If you like rainy future cities you'll dig the art style.

Anne

This creepy mask means the person under it is lying.

Monochrome on colour is a nice touch.

???

You're the last person I was expecting to see here, Foley.

ROGUE LIKED

Play as a vampire, hacker, gorilla, bartender, or 22 other characters in **STREETS OF ROGUE**. By Samuel Horti

On my first run, I'm an assassin, backstabbing enemies and slinging shuriken. Then I'm a jock, barrelling through walls and swinging a baseball bat. Next, I'm a gorilla, flanked by three other primates, tearing scientists apart with my bare hands in the middle of downtown. I avoid the patrolling cops on that last one, because I've injected two of my companions with an invisibility serum – plus, there's a riot in the streets.

In this brilliant 2D roguelike you play as one of 26 characters, killing targets and stealing MacGuffins from guarded buildings. After you finish all your missions you take the elevator to the next procedurally-generated floor, and keep going until you die or reach the end. Missions are formulaic and repeat often, and the world doesn't feel all that different between stages despite a few new buildings and NPC types. But what makes *Streets of Rogue* special, and unpredictable, are the unique traits of each character, which create all sorts of new, surprising interactions with the world.

It's designed in the style of an immersive sim, in that each character has multiple ways to approach any given situation. As the hacker, I'm asked to kill a member of the blue gang, the Crepes. He's surrounded by buddies, and as a scrawny nerd I'm

no good with my fists or a pistol. There are no nearby turrets I can program to target him and no computers to blow up in his face, which are two of my usual tricks. So I hire him as a bodyguard for the rest

of the level, walk to the other side of town, and dive into a den of red gang Blandhs, who gun him down without blinking. Job done.

After a zombie infestation special event cuts that run short, I choose the

cannibal, who regenerates health by munching corpses. On the third floor, I have to steal a wallet from a chest in the back room of a bar. But bartenders don't like cannibals, and if I try to walk in I'll be bounced out by him and his customers. I could blow a hole in the wall with a grenade, but everyone outside will see. Instead, I pour a vial of a mystery liquid into the air filtration system, which saps their strength. I burst through the

With the assassin I'm playing a slow-burn stealth game

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A chaotic rogue-like with endless player choice

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Matt Dabrowski

PUBLISHER
tinyBuild

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1050Ti, i7-7700HQ CPU, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to four-player co-op, both online and local

LINK
streetsofrouge.com

door and beat them bloody, gorge on their bodies, and grab the wallet.

As well as randomised missions, each character has their own optional 'big quest', and if you complete its task on each of a run's 15 levels you receive a new permanent ability for that class. They're often the highlight of a run. The bartender has to make and serve three drinks to different NPCs on each level, and each recipe has its own effect on the drinker, enraging them, poisoning them, or making them super fast. The firefighter's big quest is to extinguish fires set by arsonists, who only appear if you choose that character.

These quests, and the unique traits of each character, make picking a new class feel like playing a completely different game. With the assassin I'm playing a slow-burn stealth game. With the soldier it's a top-down shooter. Even if you stick with one character, each run takes on its own personality thanks to the items you find in shops, chests and safes, as well as the traits you pick up.

DIRE TRAITS

There are a few things I find bothersome, though. Commanding your companions is fiddly, but if you don't micromanage them they'll run off and get themselves killed. And it's too easy to get into buildings by knocking on the door, waiting for the person to answer and ducking inside as soon as they turn around.

Those sticking points aside, *Streets of Rogue* is absolutely worth playing, and once you start, it's very difficult to stop. It gives you more freedom than almost any roguelike, and its varied cast of characters, combined with the randomness of traits and mutators, mean no two runs play out the same way. ■

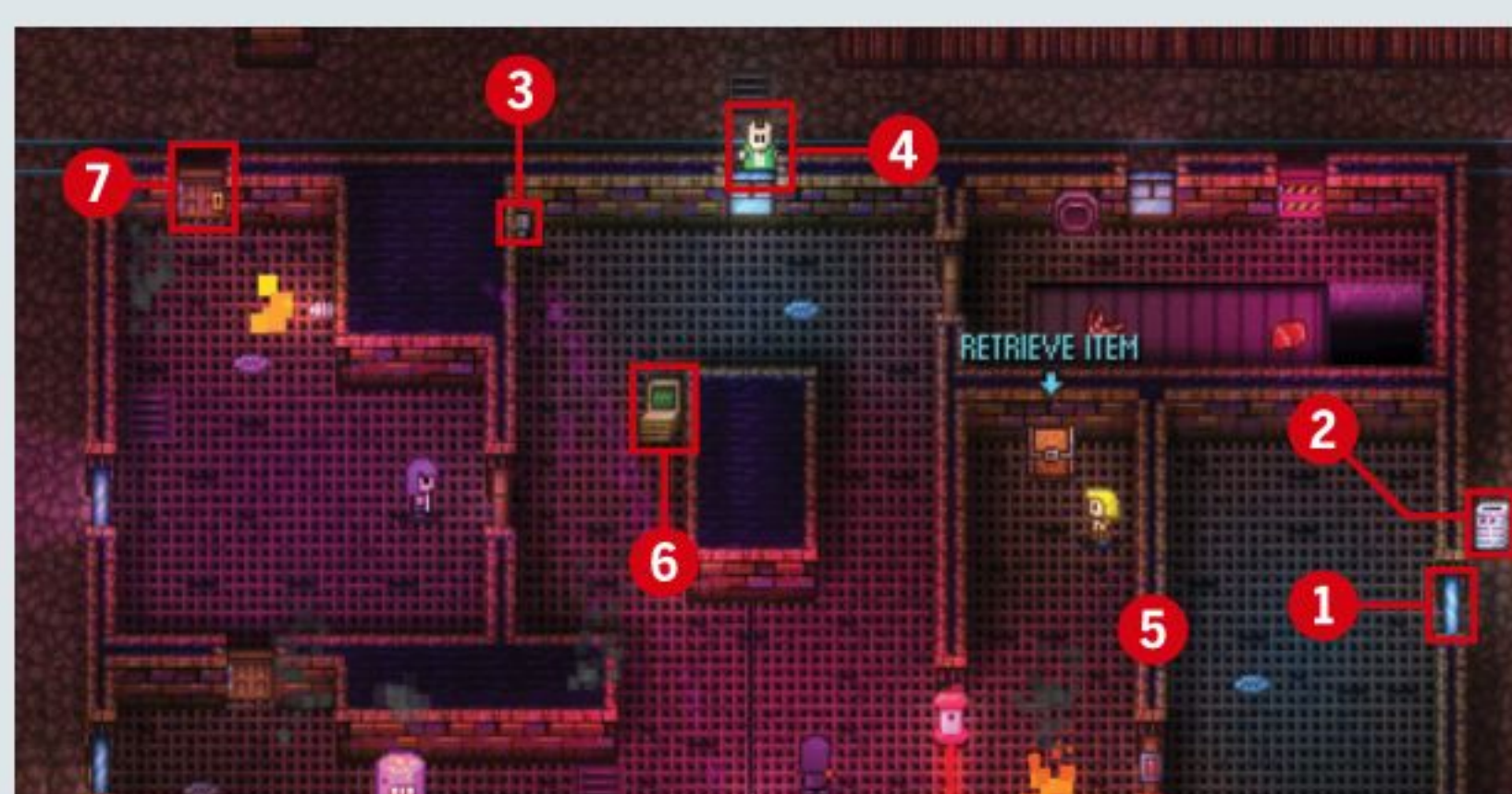
LOOK AT YOU, HACKER

I need to steal an item from that guarded chest. I could:

1 Jimmy open this window, slip inside, and sneak around the guards

2 Empty out the building by putting poison in the air filter, then walk in

3 Hack the security system so it turns on the guards



4 The jock allows for a simple approach – he can barge through walls

5 Blow the walls down with a grenade for an unsubtle entrance

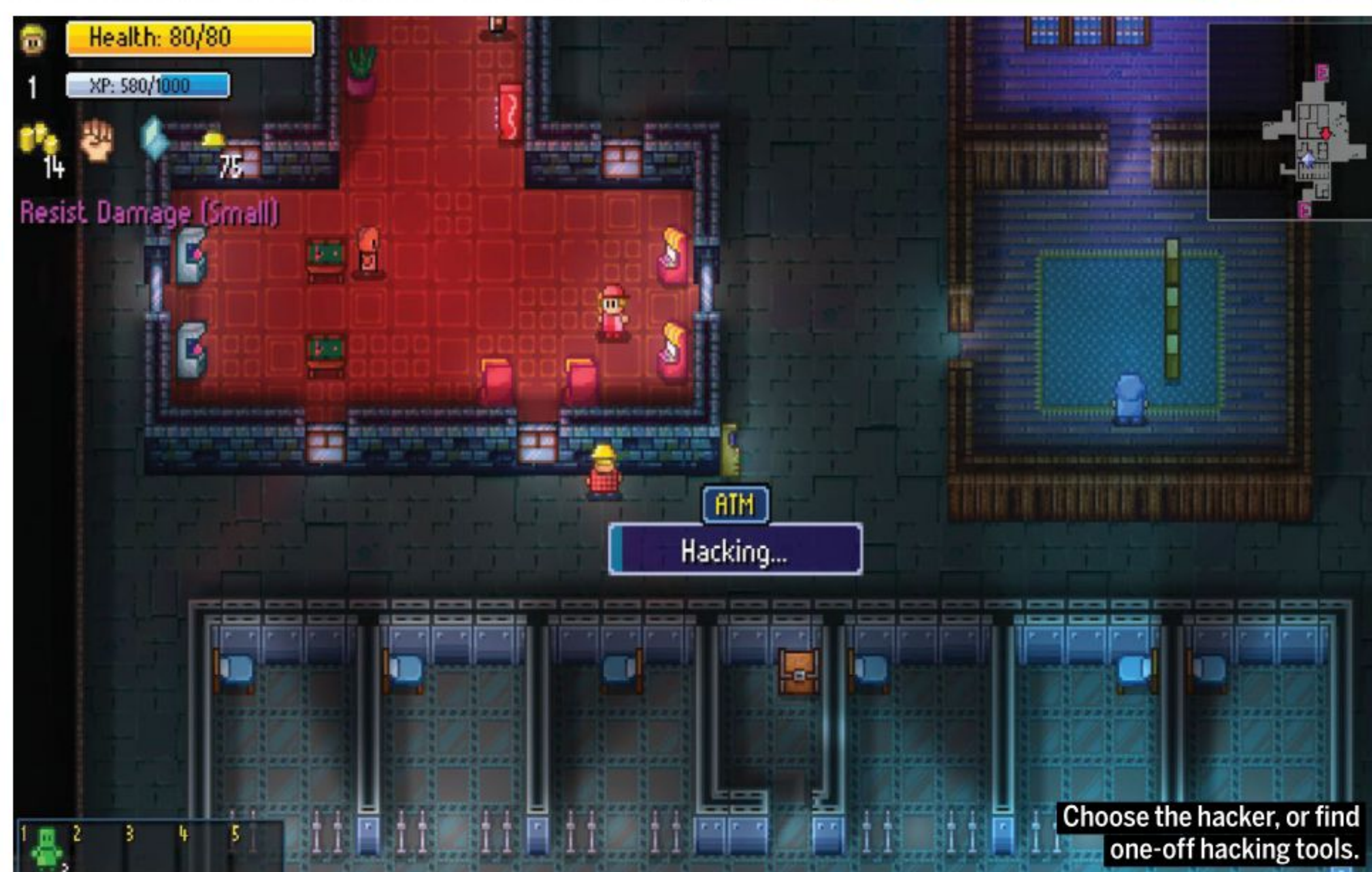
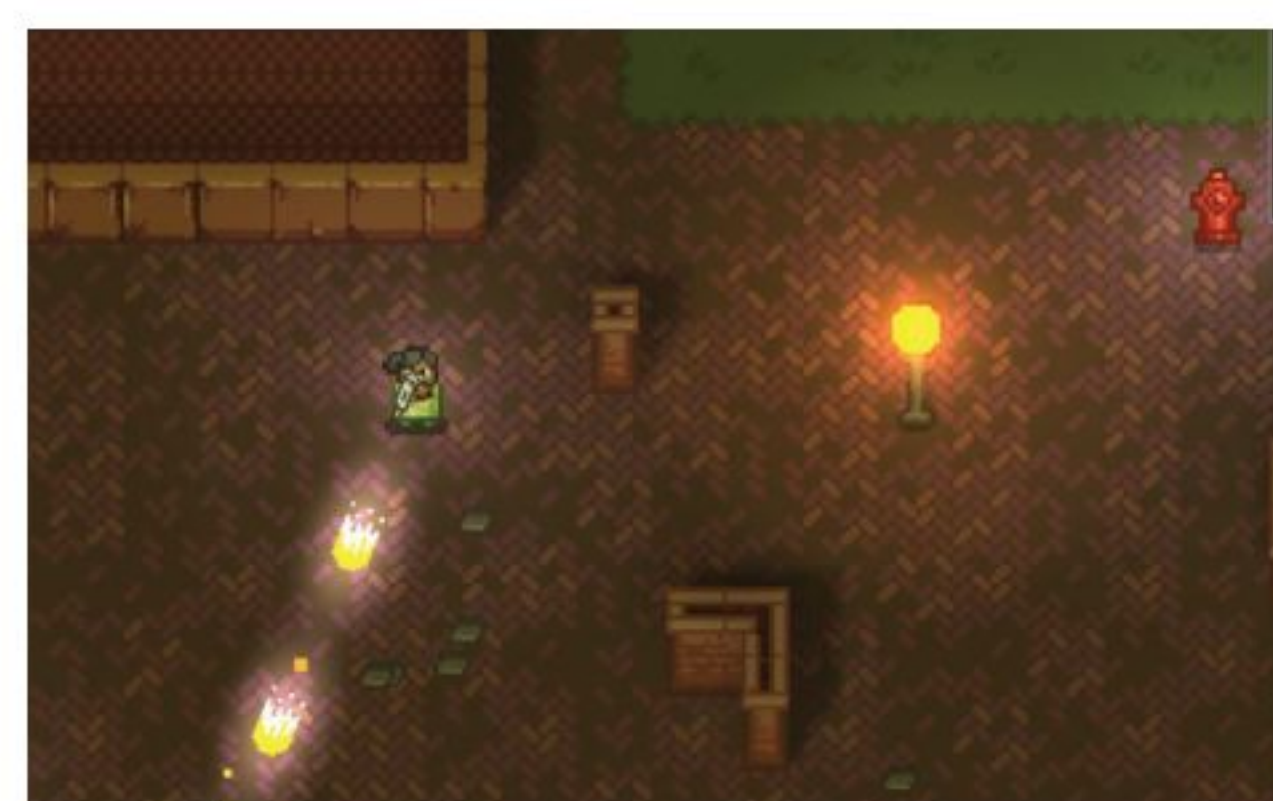
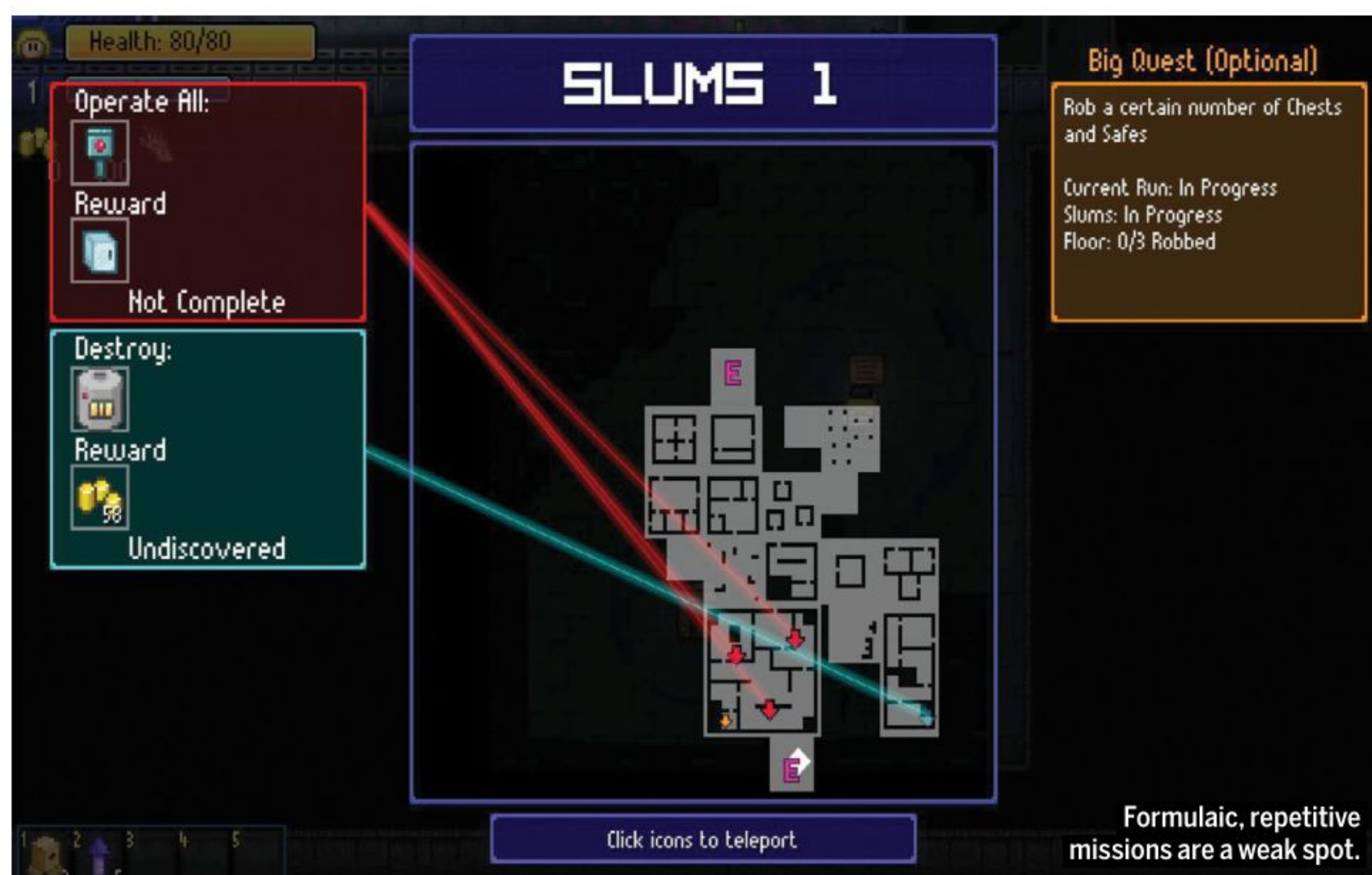
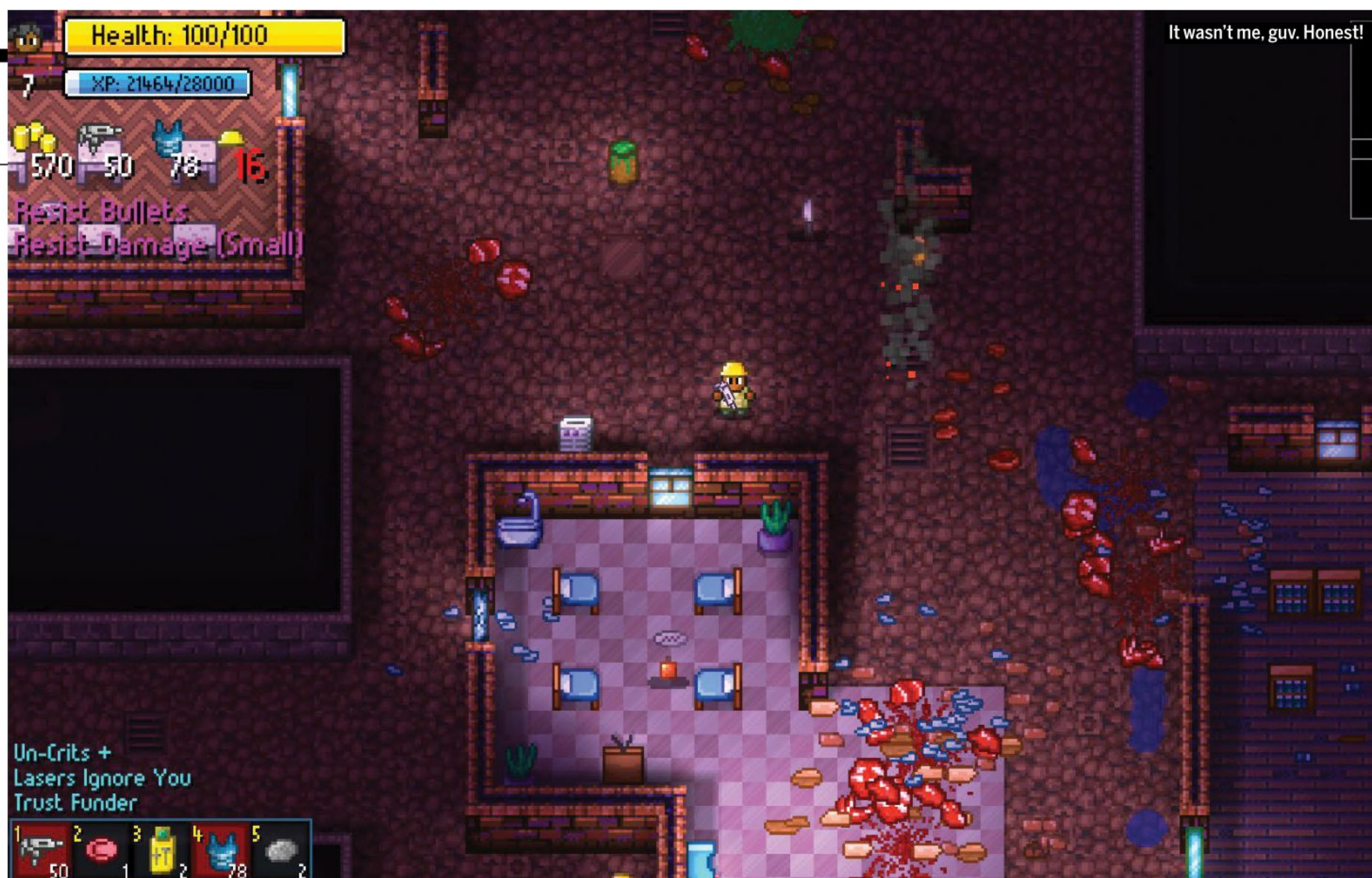
6 Disable the cameras and door locks and stealth through

7 Stock up on ammo, shoot the door down, and kill everyone in sight

PC GAMER VERDICT

Streets of Rogue is a flexible roguelike with countless new playstyles to keep you coming back again and again.

84



ROBOT WOK

AUTOMACHEF turns food into a feat of careful engineering. *By Tom Hatfield*

My favourite level of *Automachef* is simple – there are only two recipes, a chicken sandwich and a burger, but the kitchen is the size of a toolshed. Forced to make do with only one grill and one food processor, I establish loops of conveyor belts to shuffle ingredients around. With all available space filled I sit back and click go, only to realise I'd forgotten the machine that takes customer's orders. Time to start over.

Automachef is a production line game – that is to say it's a game about carefully arranging conveyor belts, mechanical arms and other doodads along a grid to guide ingredients through various stages of cooking, mixing and packaging.

As the name might suggest this one is about food. Specifically fast food – heart attack burgers, fried chicken, and greasy BLTs will power your way to world domination, quite literally if the AI that serves as your jokey mission narrator is to be believed.

A simple recipe like a plain burger will require two dispensers, one producing patties and one producing buns, a grill for the patty to cook, and an assembler to combine them. But wait! What if you want to offer a cheeseburger? Well then you'll also need a dispenser producing cheese and a food processor to slice it.

But do you really want to invest in a second grill? Why not recycle the bun and patty setup and simply send

half of them to the cheeseburger assembler to be combined with your newly processed cheese? And while you're there, why not send a side salad through that processor to be chopped up, too? This is where the

real pleasure of the game begins. It sets off some deep primal need for optimisation in my brain that ends up with complicated loops of conveyor belts and robotic arms purely so I don't have to buy a second deep fat fryer.

While there is a more sandbox-y contracts mode, the meat (and bun) of the game is in the campaign, each level of which features different kinds of recipes to fulfil and a specific twist to add challenge. I've already spoken about the tiny burger shack level, but other missions are similarly inventive. One kitchen has a faulty electric grid that causes blackouts if the power levels spike too high, another has a rush hour, while a third features a picky film critic who insists on being served immediately.

"The meat (and bun) of the game is in the campaign"

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A robot kitchen production line simulator

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Hermes Interactive

PUBLISHER
Team 17

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5, 16gb RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
www.automachef.com

Scattered along the critical path are optional levels that offer even more novelty. One tasked me with catering a speed eating competition, working with simple recipes at astronomical volumes. There's a steady flow of challenging complications (kitchen fires, takeaway orders) and stronger equipment to help deal with it (my kingdom for a faster deep fryer).

Some levels can get pretty fiendish too. I've finished about two-thirds of the campaign, but the later missions are exponentially harder than the early ones. The introduction of different delivery hatches for takeaways and eating in had me stumped for some time before I eventually designed a slow moving sushi style conveyor that my robo-arms could pluck each order from as it came in. For the most part the difficulty curve works well, although the introduction of loaded cheese fries early on leads to a surprising difficulty spike.

COOKING ROBO

As with all the best production games, real thought has been put into the feel of *Automachef*. Machines slam down with a satisfying thunk and even the menus make a pleasing clack as you navigate between them. A handful of minor UI issues aside (it takes an annoying amount of scrolling to get a dispenser to shoot out one burger per order) *Automachef* is a joy to simply click around in, and that matters a lot considering how often you'll be plopping down, adjusting, and removing machines.

Automachef is like the food it serves: it's not terribly inventive, but it's cooked extremely well, making the most of its simple ingredients. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A simple dish delivered with consummate skill. *Automachef* is the gourmet burger of production line games.

84

HOW THE SAUSAGE IS MADE *A tour of the assembly line*

- Chicken
- Fries
- Side Salad
- Burger



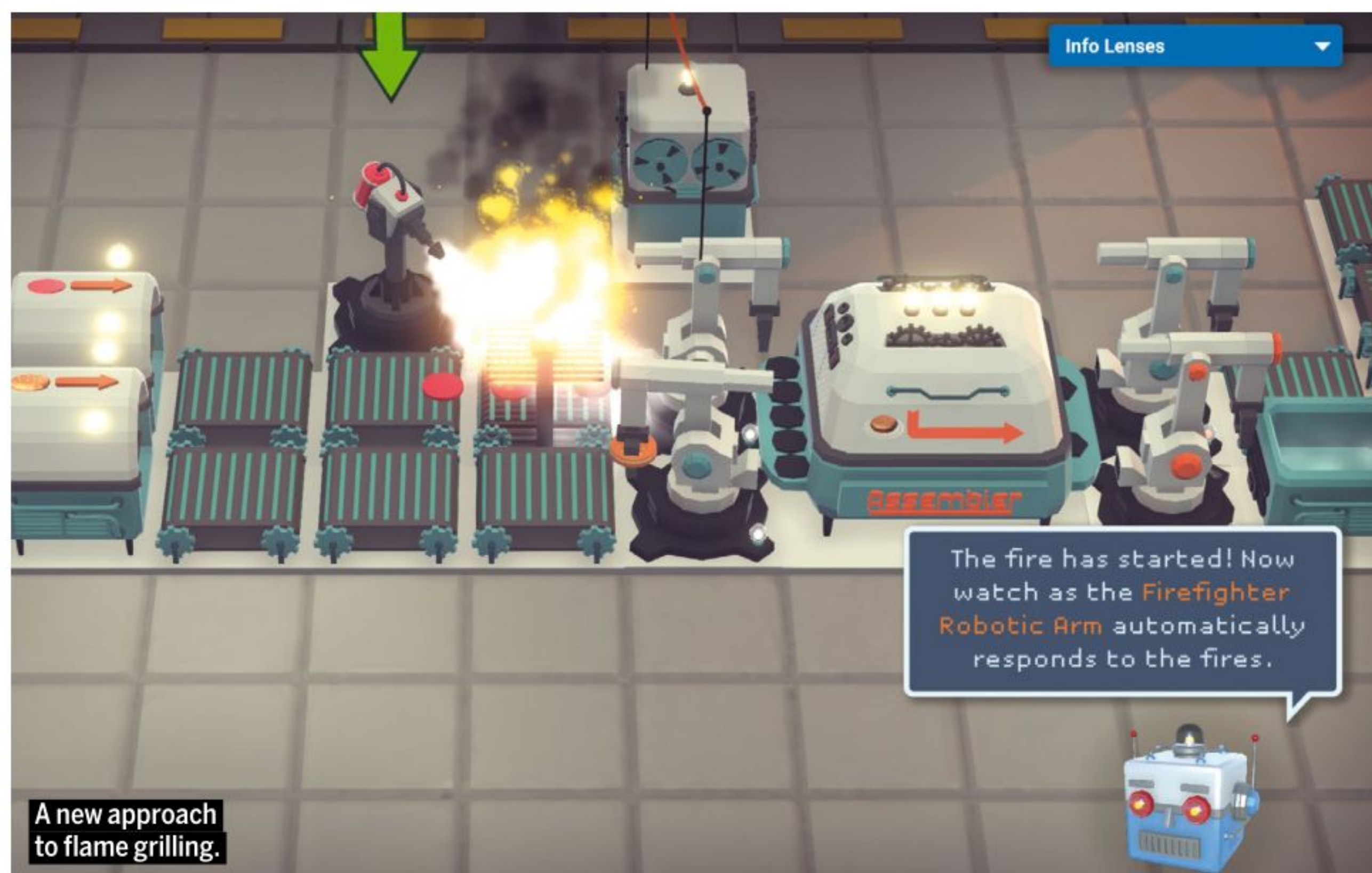
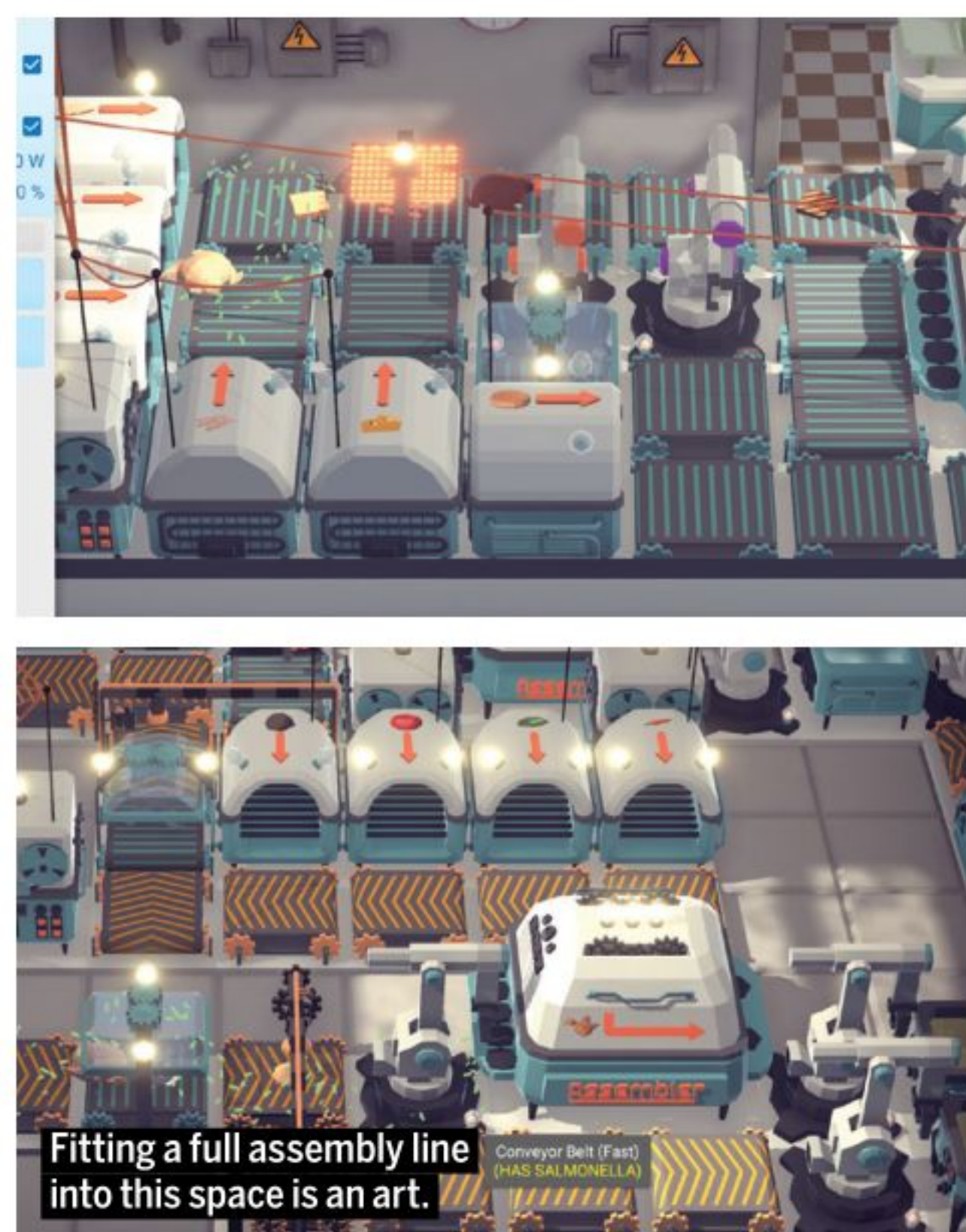
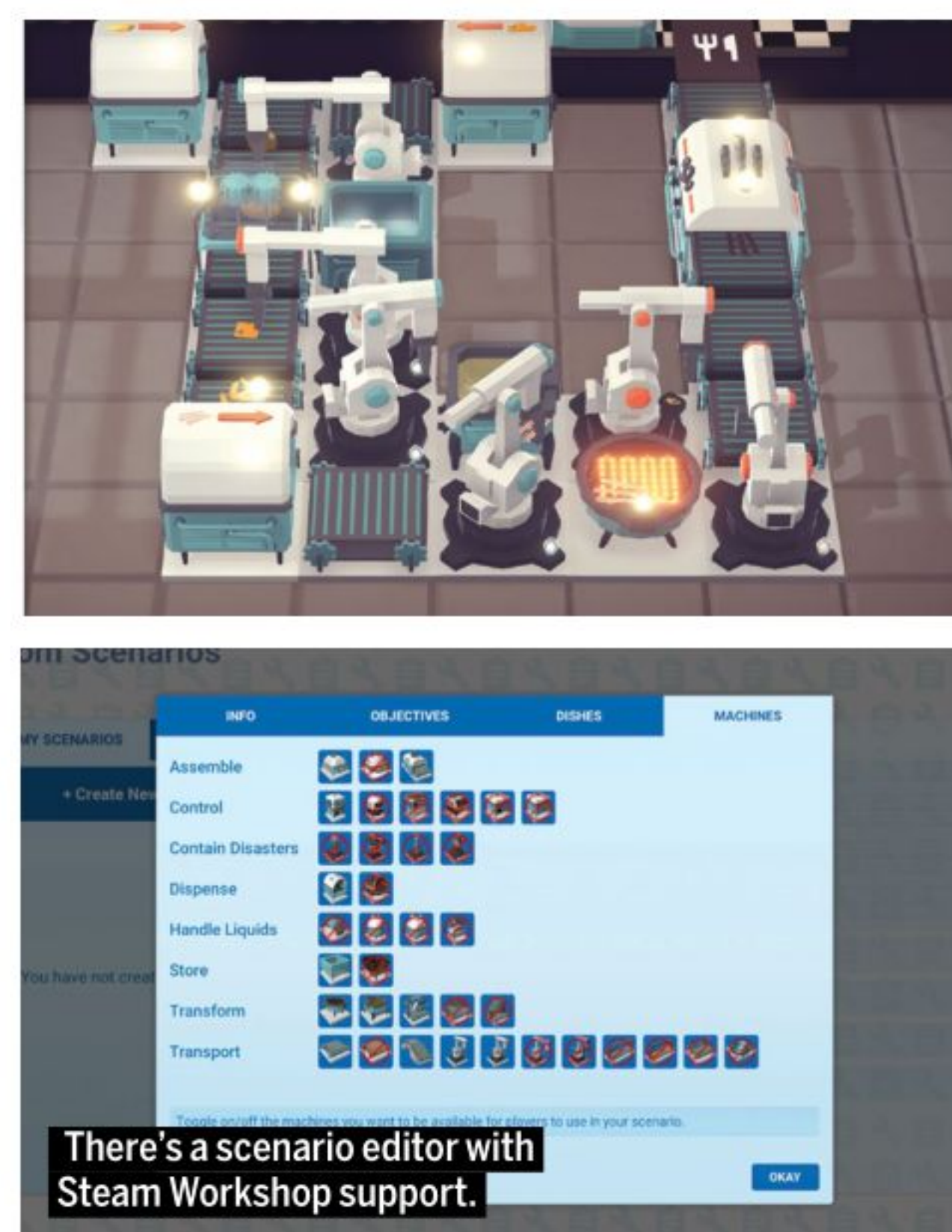
1 The chicken bits and potatoes come out here.

2 A food processor preps the ingredients before sending them their separate ways.

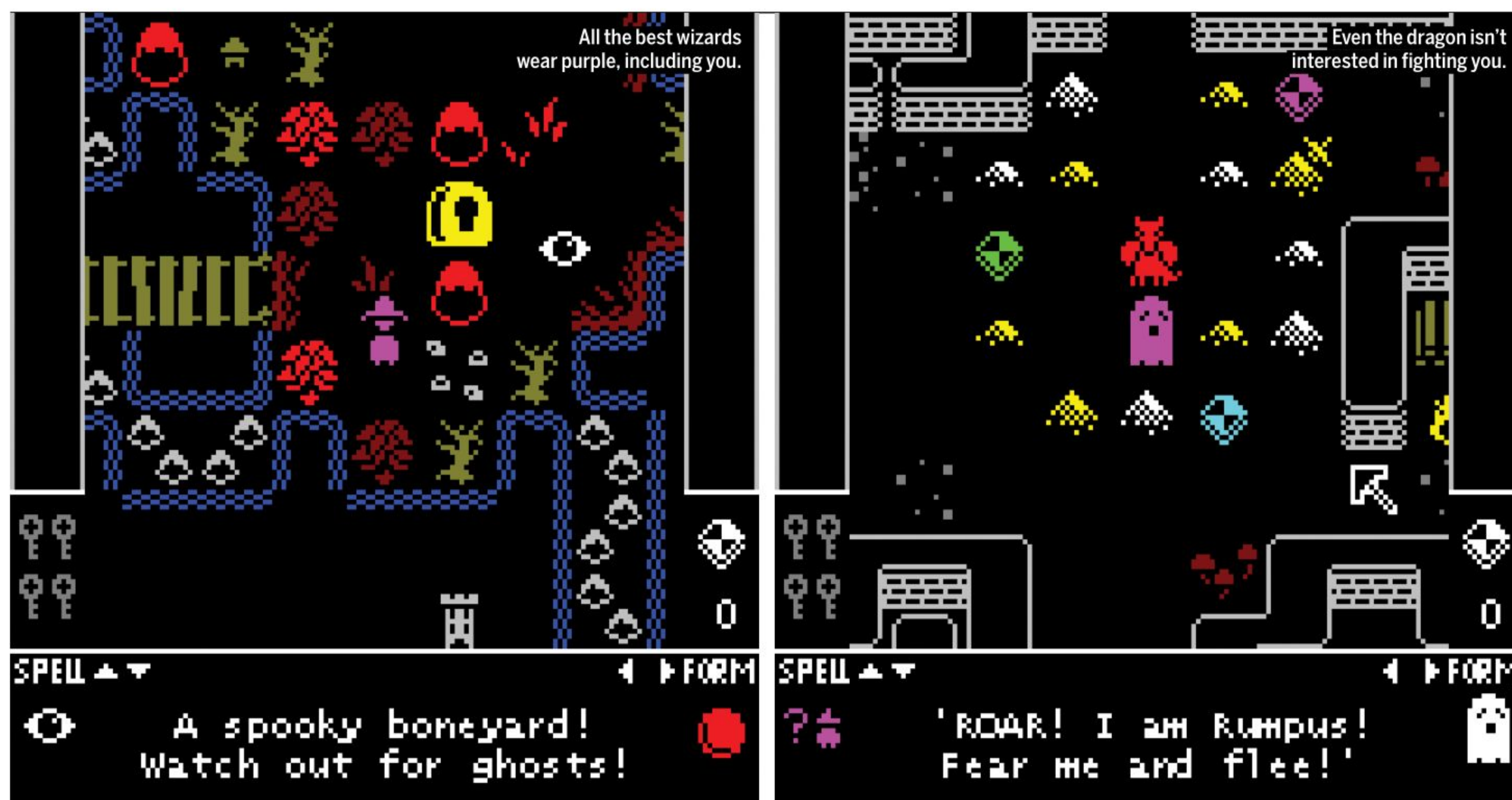
3 This arm steals a tomato from the salad to put on the burger.

4 The side salads go in this bucket, then an arm picks them out depending on if they are ordered separately or as part of a meal.

5 The packager combines the chicken, salad and fries into a meal deal.



Transmute



A REAL WIZ

Having a transformative puzzle experience with **TRANSMUTE!** By Tom Sykes

Wizards and witches are famed for their ability to transform stuff into other stuff, but we almost never get to do that in games. We're too busy flinging fireballs and setting ice traps to turn princes into frogs, to turn donkeys into kings, probably because those spells don't have much utility in combat.

As a game without combat, *Transmute!* is free to focus on the silly stuff, the faintly ridiculous magic that would see you kicked out of *Oblivion's* mage guild. So you can't enchant a sword, but you can turn cats into computers, transform yourself into a pickaxe, and restore ghosts to their living selves at the click of a mouse.

A puzzle game that looks like it should have been released on a cassette tape, *Transmute!* features cute, low-res pixel art, a refreshingly light-hearted fantasy world, and delightfully riddle-filled dialogue that expands the lore even as it doles out none-too-subtle hints. Yet despite looking old, it doesn't really play like it, eschewing the frustrating difficulty that generally accompanied a ZX Spectrum game. You can't stuff things up, or die, because nobody minds your presence.

Delightfully riddle-filled dialogue that expands the lore

You have a few useful skills. The first is your ability to examine everything around you, adding that bush or that dog to your expanding repertoire. These are the things that you can turn other things into, providing your target item is made of reddest ruby. Now, in the real world not many things are, but you'll find plenty of animals, people, fauna and objects made of the gemstone here.

Your second skill, and the focal point of the puzzling, is the transmute spell, which will transform those ruby things into... whatever you want. Ruby items are generally obstacles, that will clear out of your way after you've used the correct form on them, say by turning a boulder into a missing frog, which will then hop away to rejoin its ribbiting friends. It's a shame you're not rewarded with a funny line of

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A retro-styled puzzle game where you play as a transforming wizard

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Linker

PUBLISHER
Linker

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz, 6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
bit.ly/Transmute

dialogue, or with anything, when you employ the wrong form, but considering how many forms there are, it's understandable.

PIFF PAFF POOF!

I do have another gripe, the controls. They're mostly fine but pretty fiddly when it comes to selecting the transformations. You do this by pressing Q or E, left or right, for ages, the game making you cycle past the dozens of forms you've discovered – and all of the ones you haven't yet – every time you want to use one.

But the game redeems itself with its third spell, which allows you to assume any of these varied forms yourself. Suddenly there's another purpose to, for instance, the worm form – to allow your wizard to slither through wall cracks. *Transmute!* was already a puzzler's dream, but that third spell was like laser eye surgery, revealing a world far richer than the one I knew. To borrow a phrase from another wizard, now that's magic. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A truly lovely puzzle game that takes a clever concept and masterfully builds a world around it.

84

ALBION THE TOILET

Industrious horror in **ALBION**. By Tom Sykes

Predicting a dystopia surely only a few decades away, *Albion* transports you to a grim industrial Britain where strange machines hum incessantly, and where giant tentacles slink through the streets, feeding on god knows what. You've come to this realm to, oh you know the score, to read stray notes and press a few buttons. It's an indie first-person horror game, but a good one.

Albion stands out immediately thanks to its monochrome colour scheme, and a setting that feels like Sheffield by way of *Silent Hill*. Blood streaks line the streets, of course, and pulsating tentacles have punctured many of the houses. But *Albion* saves its greatest horrors for its interiors.

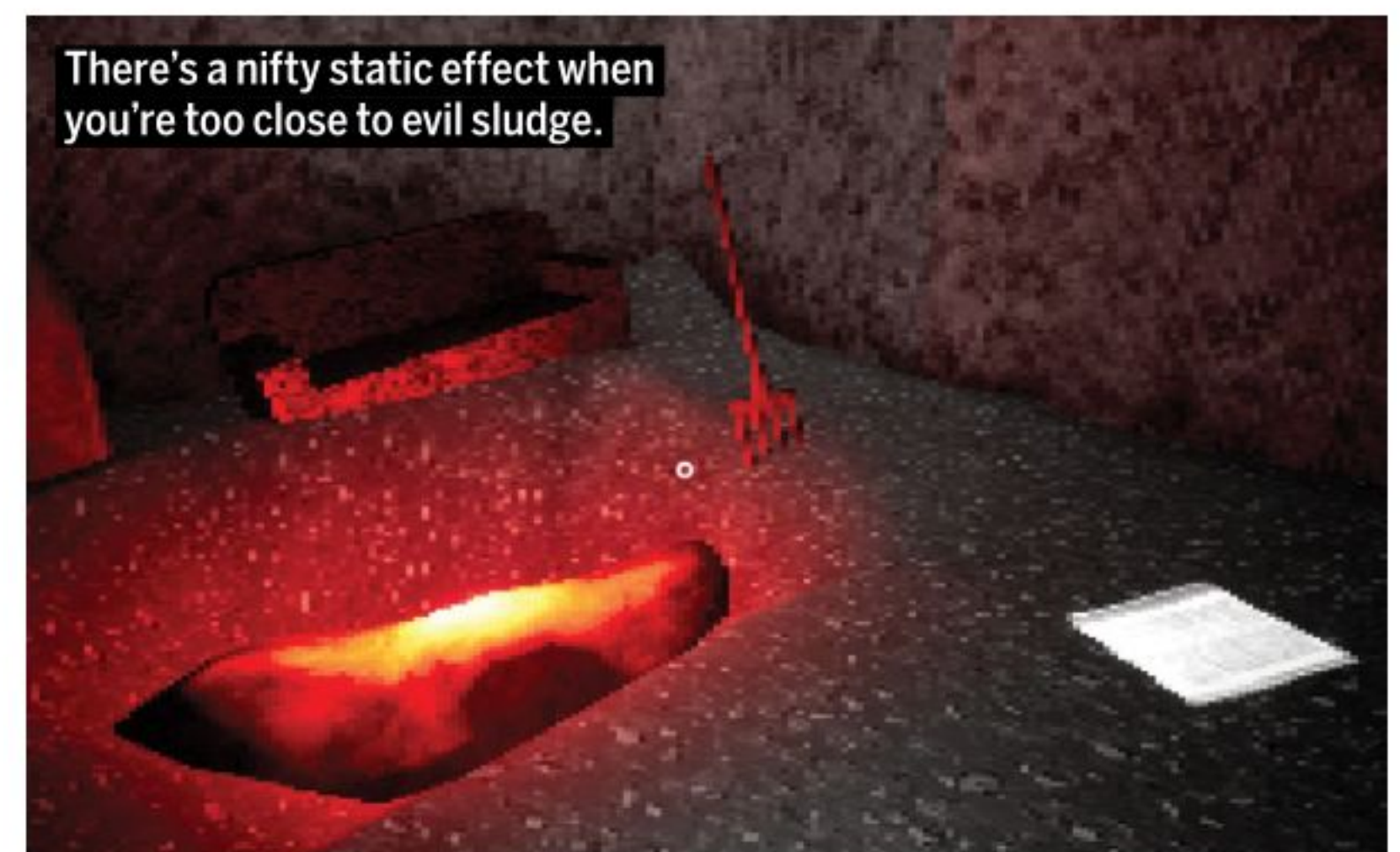
Enter a house and you'll be greeted by menacing pipes, by barricaded rooms that spew out static when you draw near. Outside is a bit

too open and sparse to really scare, while the more claustrophobic dwellings have some strong examples of environmental storytelling. That sealed room set my imagination racing, as did the fleshy wall in one of the other homes.

There are a few impressive set pieces as you draw closer to the monolithic factory that seems integral to the nightmare, before an ending happens, suddenly and a bit perfunctorily. There's some great build-up here, sadly not building up to very much.

It might end with a whimper, but that doesn't detract much from the memorable sights found before it, as you stalk the streets, following blood trails and investigating eerie homes. There's a soupçon of *Silent Hill*, and some of the industrial atmosphere of *Eraserhead* to this well-sketched nightmare world. ■

68



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
NANCY.ADAM.SUSAN

LINK
nancyadamsusan.itch.io

LANDS OF AWW

SHADOW OVER THE TWELVE LANDS. By Tom Sykes

You may have heard of PICO-8, but are you familiar with TIC-80, a 'fantasy computer' with a similar set of harsh restrictions? These include a teeny screen resolution, severe code restrictions, and a limited colour palette, and of course people have overcome them to make some extraordinary things.

Shadow Over the Twelve Lands is such a game, somehow cramming a full-fat, first-person dungeon crawler in the style of *Might & Magic* into a 240x136 window, and a 64kb code file. It's an impressive technical achievement, but it's also an eminently playable game in its own right: a throwback to a bygone age.

Like the old games, you're practically dumped on the overworld, with just the clothes on your back and a bit of gold that won't go very far. After a brief foray into the first

dungeon, you accidentally unleash a great evil upon the world, and your party is sent to prison for a decade.

You bust out, of course. Fixing your mistake involves exploring a newly monster-filled map, delving into yet more loot-filled dungeons. There's a simple but enjoyable turn-based combat system that reminds of *Final Fantasy*, a town full of (text-only) shops to visit, and all the inventory-wrangling you'd expect from a typical dungeon-crawler, somehow workable using only two buttons and the cursor keys.

Almost everything you would want from the genre is here, albeit squished and garish to look at, and without the immense length or difficulty of its forebears. But it's pretty funny, light, and refreshingly earnest. A breezy RPG you can play in a browser, and that should leave a warm smile on your face. ■

75



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
btco

LINK
btco.itch.io

Carrying this squishy boi around like a comfort blanket.



MARITIME SINK

SUBNAUTICA teaches me to love and fear the seas

This might be a terrible idea. *Subnautica*, while beautiful, manages to combine two of my greatest fears: massive sea monsters and confined spaces. I'm not sure what I find more upsetting – being devoured by a leviathan or hiding in a cramped escape pod. On the upside, I love aquariums, battered cod, tartar sauce and survival games, so let's remain positive. Hopefully it'll all balance out in the end.

I manage to set myself on fire during *Subnautica*'s intro, in which my escape pod is jettisoned from a damaged spaceship, the Aurora. I'm assuming flames will be less of a problem moving forward. From my bobbing pod, the only things I can see are an endless expanse of water and smouldering wreckage of the spaceship. There's no land in sight. My first thought is "I'll just stay here" sat on top of my escape pod, slowly starving to death. It's a wonderfully bleak opening that speaks to some elemental human need to be near land. But also – it's a survival game, so I should probably go swimming.

Before long I'm plucking acidic mushrooms from the sea floor and exploring twisting coral caves. It's gorgeous and nothing has tried to eat me yet. I even find dinner – a juicy

alien fish called a Peeper, essentially an eyeball with fins. I scoff it down before I realise I can go back to my pod and cook it using the fabricator. At least it was fresh.

I'm amazed at how much I can craft in *Subnautica*. Everything in the pod is knackered, so I decide my first priority should be a repair tool. I also have enough stuff to craft a survival knife – very reassuring – and some flippers. These should even the odds if

I happen across a 200ft subaqueous killing machine.

UP FROM THE DEPTHS

My new gear gives me the confidence to swim deep enough to find sulphur, one of the necessary ingredients for my repair tool (although not without drowning twice). This feels like a milestone – in every survival game

I also have enough stuff to craft a survival knife – very reassuring

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

Subaqueous survival sim featuring gaming's crispest coral

EXPECT TO PAY

£19.50

DEVELOPER

Unknown Worlds Entertainment

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-7700 CUP @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

unknownworlds.com/subnautica/

there's a tipping point where you stop just making the stuff you need to exist, and start choosing things that define your experience. Thirty minutes ago I was afraid to go in the water, now I'm fixing things. The progression in *Subnautica* is great – it's opening up in a way that makes me hungry to explore more. Just as I'm starting to feel like I'm the master of my destiny, I discover that there's a hatch on the bottom of my pod, and that I've been climbing in through the top the entire time. It's me, scourge of coral, nautical stabmaster, guy who gets hatches wrong.

The story stuff gives my hopeless splashing purpose. The Aurora explodes in spectacular fashion – I was too scared to swim to it, anyway – and I start to get radio messages from fellow survivors. Even after a short time, it's massively reassuring to hear (almost certainly dead) human voices. I'm no longer terrified of this world – I'm happy to lose days playing it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Subnautica is gorgeous, captivating, and manages to be just the right kind of intimidating.

90

DARK WATER

A death worth celebrating in **SUNLESS SEA**

One of the best things about going back to a game like *Sunless Sea* is learning how weird all your previous choices were. Apparently, past me thought it'd be a great idea to name my captain Beatrice Klump and send her out into Underzee on a quest for immortality, accompanied only by a comatose ferret and a chipper cannoneer. A sense of doom surrounds Ms Klump like wasps around a dustbin, but that's partially the point. In *Sunless Sea*, it's not if your captains die, but when and how that matters.

Surprisingly, it's not going as badly as one might expect. A travel writer who's also a probably-murderer pays Beatrice handsomely for dropping him off at various deserted outposts. And I establish a solid income by snitching on various ports to the admiralty. Then, in her hubris,

Beatrice decides to sail north. It's a great feeling. An hour ago, I'd forgotten she existed. But Failbetter's stories give purpose and character to my silhouetted avatar. I've grown rather attached to Captain Klump.

Beatrice is crushed by a sentient iceberg moments later. It's not all bad. This tragedy lets me experience one of the coolest things about *Sunless Sea* – Beatrice might be consigned to an icy grave, but her legacy, slight as it is, lives on. A Warrant of Redemption lets me continue as an associate of Klump's, retaining some of the abilities or crew gained on her quest for immortality.

My new captain is Marmaduke DeSoulis. Buoyed by my fresh knowledge I head out onto the zee. And there's great news! As well as letting me keep one officer, the game has given me the ferret, too. This game is wonderful. ■

88



Directly to the bin, please.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£14

DEVELOPER
Failbetter Games

PUBLISHER
In-house



OCTODAD

Somewhere, in an alternate universe, there's a version of this game that's pure Cronenbergian terror. Where the theme tune is replaced by low droning, and we learn, in explicit detail, answers to all the questions *Octodad* makes us afraid to ask: was there ever a human husband? Where did the children come from? What happens to the people who discover the truth? Body horror elements aside, *Octodad* is still absurd fun. It's never simple enough to feel like a normal game, but not so erratic that it becomes irritating. And despite the opening, I love the premise – even if there's something stressful about all those humans staring at you, trying to work out what's wrong. ■

78



ABZÛ

After the sporadic dread of *Subnautica*, going back to *Abzû* is calming like watching a four-hour video of an aquarium while sat in a champagne bubble bath. There are moments on the first playthrough that feel like they're going to descend into nautical horror, but it never does. It feels like the creatures here are part of an ecosystem, rather than just a game – it's a celebration of oceanic life. The story does get hamfisted towards the end – which at least provides purpose for those of us not captivated by shoal formations – but it's still a relaxing, transcendental experience in places. Only the weighted blanket of David Attenborough narration could make it more relaxing. ■

85



MAN O' WAR: CORSAIR

Diving back into *Man o' War* is like finding a box of miniatures you painted when you were 12 – mostly bad, but with some pleasant surprises. It's been updated since I played it last, adding new factions like Tzeench (capricious birdwizards) and Slaanesh (sexy goatcrabs). And it still manages to distract, thanks to a fine map, great music, and the odd stirring sea battle.

So it's still not amazing, then, but like the miniatures it provides an entertaining few hours of guilty indulgence. ■

68



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STARWARS
& DESTINY
POSTERS!

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2 MAGS XBOX + 50 HOT NEW GAMES MAG SEE INSIDE >>



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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOU AND YOUR GAMES DESERVE

102

BUYER'S GUIDE

The best PC parts for your build, whatever your budget.



100

REVIEW

Is Nvidia's new high-end Super card your next essential upgrade?

GROUP TEST

GAMING LAPTOPS

Our picks of the best gaming laptops in 2019. From premium to budget, there's something here for every gamer.

By Bo Moore,
Gabe Carey



Finding the best gaming laptop isn't necessarily about sheer power (that helps, for sure); it's about the price, the build, the form factor, and the practicality of using it as a laptop. Components are still vital though. Some of the best have started to adopt the newer i8 and i9 Intel CPUs, as well as properly integrating RTX cards. Such combinations will boost gaming performance, but the price does follow suit. You'd be surprised at how manufacturers have managed to keep their designs lightweight and slim given the premium parts inside, too. Without further ado, here are our picks for the best gaming laptops you can currently get.



Blade 15 Advanced Model

RAZER **£3,150**

The best gaming laptop in 2019

1 Not much has changed since the advent of the original Razer Blade 15 in spring 2018. The refreshed, so-called “Advanced Model” is outfitted with the same CNC-milled aluminium chassis as its predecessor, only this time it harbours the latest graphics chips from Nvidia.

Among its configurations are an RTX 2080 model, capable of running the ray traced Metro Exodus at over 50fps with all the visual settings cranked to the top. In our testing, despite its power-hungry guts, it wowed us with an unusual five hour and one minute battery life. So while it's

no longer the thinnest or the lightest in its class, it is the longest lasting premium gaming laptop we've seen to date. It's also one of the more expensive.

The Razer Blade 15 Advanced Model is the overall best gaming laptop on the market right now, and until someone else steps up to the plate to contest this crowning achievement, it will continue to sit here at the top of this list.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Unparalleled build quality
- ⊕ Wide range of CPU/GPU options
- ⊖ Costs more for the same
- ⊖ No longer thinnest or lightest

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I7-8750H / GPU: NVIDIA GEFORCE RTX 2080 / RAM: 16GB DDR4-2666MHZ / SCREEN: 15.6-INCH FHD (1,920 X 1,080) IPS 144HZ / STORAGE: 512GB M.2 SSD / BATTERY: 80WHR / WEIGHT: 4.63 LBS

GS65 Stealth Thin

MSI **£2,297**

2018's champ is still the best laptop to many people

2 The GS65 Stealth Thin is the best gaming laptop we tested in 2018. It's a fantastic all-rounder that still packs a punch in terms of specs and design. It has the versatility of a notebook and, because it's light and sturdy, it's incredibly easy to just pop into your bag and carry round all day for whatever you need to use it for. It has a sleek matte black aluminium body with gold accents that feels sturdy and luxe – and thankfully lacking in obnoxious gamer aesthetics. Best of all, in addition to a slim, 18mm thickness, the screen's 4.9mm thin bezels allow for a

overall chassis size that's about an inch smaller than most 15-inch laptops, while still packing the same screen real-estate. While it won't do ray-tracing, the spec here is enough to handle most modern games. However, the MSI GS65 Stealth Thin models are in something of a transition right now. It's tough to track down the 1070 build, which is probably the best, unless you want 32GB of RAM and a 1TB SSD.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Sleek and powerful
- ⊕ Long battery life
- ⊖ 144Hz screen
- ⊖ No G-Sync

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I7-8750H / GPU: NVIDIA GEFORCE GTX 1060 MAX-Q / RAM: 16GB DDR4-2400MHZ / SCREEN: 15.6-INCH FHD (1,920 X 1,080) WIDE-VIEW 144HZ / STORAGE: 512GB M.2 SSD / BATTERY: 82 WHR / WEIGHT: 4.14 LBS

GROUP TEST



**THE ACER PREDATOR
HELIOS 300 IS THE
BEST BUDGET GAMING
LAPTOP YOU CAN BUY**

3

Predator Helios 300

ACER **£1,150**

The best budget gaming laptop

3 Acer's Predator Helios 300 offers an incredible value proposition. At just over a grand, sometimes less if you can find it on sale, it offers a GTX 1060 6GB graphics card that can lock down 60 fps at near-max settings in most games from the last few years. The system's lacking in any fancy screen features like G-Sync, although you can get a model with 144Hz refresh rate, and you'll probably want to think about investing in a large HDD to back up the 256GB SSD. But those are minor issues that don't mean much when you balance them against the super-affordable price tag.

It also comes in a variety of different models and at an assortment of prices, meaning there's bound to be one or two options that suit your specific financial needs.

Put simply, the Acer Predator Helios 300 is the best budget gaming laptop that you can currently buy. It's fast, reliable and doesn't compromise on the features you need from a portable gaming device.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Incredible value
- ⊕ Decent battery life
- ⊖ Brings a 1060 GPU
- ⊖ Gaudy aesthetics

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I7-7700HQ / GPU: NVIDIA GEFORCE GTX 1060 6GB / RAM: 16GB DDR4-2133MHZ / SCREEN: 15.6-INCH FHD (1,920 X 1,080) WIDE-VIEW 60HZ / STORAGE: 256GB M.2 SATA SSD / BATTERY: 48 WHR / WEIGHT: 5.95LBS

Predator Triton 500

ACER **£2,198**

At long last, real-time ray tracing goes truly portable

4 Not everyone needs the thinnest or the most powerful gaming laptop. Sometimes still-thin and still-powerful is just fine. Striking a healthy balance between portability, performance, and price is the Acer Predator Triton 500, a Max-Q notebook that emerged from somewhere out of the woodwork to impress our dedicated team of hardware testers at the top-secret PC Gamer lab. Wielding an RTX 2080, the model we reviewed is priced somewhere in the middle. However, you can find a slightly cheaper RTX 2060 version at around the £1,750 mark.

Either way, it's well worth your while, seeing as it can push Metro Exodus at the highest settings, with ray tracing on, at an average pace of 56fps. And while it's doing so, you get to experience the luxury of its deeply satisfying 1.7mm keyboard travel and a Microsoft precision touchpad that we surprisingly don't hate. Despite its terrifying default boot-up noise, the Acer Predator Triton 500 is one for the books.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Appetizing range of prices
- ⊕ Top of the line performance
- ⊖ Lackluster battery life
- ⊖ Awful boot-up sound

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I7-8750H / GPU: NVIDIA GEFORCE RTX 2080 MAX-Q / RAM: 16GB DDR4-2,667MHZ / SCREEN: 15.6-INCH FHD (1,920 X 1,080) IPS 144HZ / STORAGE: 512GB M.2 NVME / BATTERY: 84WH / WEIGHT: 4.41LBS

HOW WE TEST

What makes one laptop more attractive than another in the eyes of a gamer? Is it light weight, for portability in between LAN parties? How about high-end hardware to facilitate the fastest frame rates? Surely connectivity matters. External displays, gaming peripherals and direct-attached storage can make you forget you're even using a notebook. Or maybe value is what matters most. For a low-enough price, we're all willing to compromise on graphics quality, right? Right?

Of course not, which is why the best builders cram in as much processing muscle as possible, even when money is tight. And at the top of the range, desktop-class components in mobile enclosures set new performance records with every generation. We run the following tests to measure performance and productivity on gaming laptops:

Cinebench 15

CrystalDisk QD32 Read and Write

3DMark Fire Strike

PCMark 10 Express

For gaming, we use the built-in benchmarks on *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, *Total War: Warhammer II*, and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Wildlands*. Tests are performed at 1080p, with V-sync and G-Sync disabled. Tests are run multiple times to ensure that thermal throttling doesn't occur. In the event that scores drop, the lower (throttled) scores are used.



GL63 8RC

MSI £800

The best entry-level gaming laptop

5 The MSI GL63 8RC has to be our top choice for ultra-budget gaming laptops. Priced as low as £690 when on sale, the GL63 comes equipped with Intel's i5-8300H, 8GB of DDR4 RAM, Nvidia's GeForce GTX 1050 and one of the thinner bezels we've seen in this price range. The only obvious downside is the lack of an included SSD. The laptop comes loaded with a 1TB HDD which means you'll probably want to upgrade the storage fairly quickly.

With its highly competitive price tag, the MSI GL63 8RC is one of the cheapest gaming laptops we could find with a GTX

1050 discrete graphics card. It's priced just a little bit higher than Acer's Aspire E 15, but the GF63 offers up to 67 percent higher gaming performance and exponentially higher performance when compared to laptops with integrated graphics.

If you're working with a tight budget, the GL63 offers everything you'd need in a laptop without putting a huge dent in your wallet.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Thin bezels
- ⊕ Easy to upgrade RAM and storage
- ⊖ No included SSD
- ⊖ More expensive than Aspire E 15

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I5-8300H / GPU: NVIDIA GEFORCE GTX 1050 4GB / RAM: 8GB DDR4-2666 / SCREEN: 15.6-INCH FHD (1,920 X 1,080) IPS / STORAGE: 1TB HDD / BATTERY: 3-CELL 41 WHR / WEIGHT: 4.85 LBS

Aero 15X v8

GIGABYTE £1,900

Productivity powerhouse with longer battery life

6 Gigabyte's Aero 15X was the first thin Max-Q laptop to catch my eye, and the 2018 Aero 15X v8 refresh remains a promising entry in the field, fixing most of the issues I had with its predecessor while keeping everything else that I love about it. Primarily, the keyboard works much better after a driver update, and the screen's been updated to a 144 Hz panel.

Compared to MSI's GS65 and the Razer Blade 15, the Aero 15X has a less attractive body with sharp edges, but wins in the productivity category on account of a bigger, 94 Whr battery. In practice – that is, our streaming

video test – that larger battery lasts upwards of six hours, compared to the GS65's four and a half. With near-identical internals, gaming performance is comparable to the GS65 as well. The biggest difference, other than the body design and battery, is that the Aero 15X can be outfitted with a 4K screen. I recommend sticking with the high refresh rate 1080p screen if gaming is your primary concern.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Incredible battery life
- ⊕ Beautiful screen
- ⊖ Rough edges
- ⊖ Some driver issues out of the box

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I7-8750H / GPU: NVIDIA GEFORCE GTX 1070 MAX-Q / RAM: 16GB DDR4-2666MHZ / SCREEN: 15.6-INCH FHD (1,920 X 1,080) IPS 144HZ / STORAGE: 512GB SSD / BATTERY: 94 WHR / WEIGHT: 4.49 LBS

REVIEW

NVIDIA RTX 2080 SUPER

A modest speed bump for a decent price.

By Jarred Walton



With no real threat from AMD at the high-end, the RTX 2080 and 2080 Ti remain unchallenged. Still, it's nearly a year after the launch of the GeForce RTX cards, and just in time for the back-to-school season, Nvidia has new and improved product refreshes available.

If you already bought an RTX 2080, you can get nearly the same level of performance via overclocking (specifically, increasing the GDDR6 clocks). If you've been thinking about buying a £700 graphics card, the RTX 2080 Super now claims top honours.



BENCHMARKS

ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

Frames per second, tested at 1440p Ultra

■ Average ■ 97 Percentile (minimum)

(Higher is better)

1	RTX 2080 Ti	52.4	72.5
2	RTX 2080 Super	47.9	62.6
3	RTX 2080	47.5	62
4	RTX 2070 Super	47.3	60.6
5	RX 5700 XT	43.8	55.6
6	RTX 2070	43.4	55.7

This is the maxed-out implementation of the TU104 chip. All the SMs, cores, and memory controllers are enabled, and clockspeeds have been pushed about as far as you're likely to see. And sure, you can probably squeeze a few percent more performance out of the card via manual overclocking, but it's definitely going to be a case of diminishing returns.

Nvidia's expectations for the RTX 2080 Super are that it will be about five to ten percent faster than a reference RTX 2080, or about five percent faster than the RTX 2080 Founders Edition (which comes with a 90MHz increase in boost clock). My tests certainly hold up Nvidia's straightforward GPU hierarchy. At 1440p, for example, the 2080 Ti is – deep breath – 17 percent faster than the 2080 Super, which is five percent faster than the 2080 FE, which is seven percent faster than the 2070 Super, which is ten percent faster than the RTX 2070, which is five percent faster than the 2060 Super, which beats the 2060 by 16 percent.

Other resolutions tell a similar story, though 1080p starts becoming CPU limited at times. The 2080 Super is only two or three percent faster on average than a 2080 FE at 1080p, while at 4K the added memory bandwidth helps a bit – it's six percent faster. Eleven percent more memory bandwidth is nice, but not really necessary. Meanwhile, there's only five percent more compute performance relative to the 2080 FE, which is why the gains in performance are all less than 11 percent and often less than five percent.

The RTX 2080 Super still does great as a card for gaming at 1440p ultra,

averaging more than 60fps in every game I tested, though admittedly *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* just barely squeaks by. 1080p ultra and 144Hz (or higher) is also mostly viable, though you'd want a G-Sync display to smooth out the occasional dips. The only problem is that the exact same thing can be said of the RTX 2080, particularly 2080 cards with a factory overclock. If all 2080 cards were still priced at £700 and up, the 2080 Super would be an easy recommendation. Instead, we have RTX 2080 cards starting at £600, and factory overclocked models for not much more.

MORE CORES

As with the other RTX Super cards, the outcome of my RTX 2080 Super testing was entirely predictable. It's a bit faster, thanks to having more cores and higher clockspeeds. It certainly isn't a revolutionary card today, but then it doesn't really need to be. It's meant as a minor upgrade to Nvidia's current products, nothing more nor less. Several months from now, assuming the vanilla RTX 2080 cards actually disappear from shelves and are replaced with 2080 Super models, the 2080 Super will become the only viable £700 (give or take) Nvidia GPU.

The only cards that are substantially faster than the RTX 2080 Super are currently priced so high that only the deepest pockets can reach.

The RTX 2080 Ti is about 20 percent faster overall at 4K, but it costs about 50 percent more. Meanwhile, the Titan RTX is 25 percent faster overall at 4K and costs more than three RTX 2080 Super cards.

TOP LEFT: The RTX is a great card, but consider whether you need to upgrade.

I'm still waiting to see a killer app for Nvidia's ray tracing hardware. So far the tech can look slightly better than traditional rasterization techniques, but the performance hit is far too steep in most games. Maybe *Wolfenstein Youngblood*, the first Vulkan-based game with ray tracing effects, will change things, but I doubt it. Developers need to figure out a way to significantly boost ray tracing performance so that the final results actually look significantly better while still delivering acceptable performance. However, I worry that it won't be until the next generation of Nvidia GPUs (RTX 3000 or whatever they're called) that we have

THE RTX 2080 SUPER STILL DOES GREAT AS A CARD FOR GAMING AT 1440P ULTRA

the hardware necessary to truly tackle real-time ray tracing without compromising performance. Let's hope some clever software developers prove me wrong. If you already have an RTX 2080, you can carry on without losing sleep. If you're putting together a new PC or upgrading from an existing GPU, and you want something more than an RTX 2070 Super and can't step up to the 2080 Ti, this will have to suffice. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

- ➕ Great for 1440p and even 4K
- ➕ Fastest GDDR6 clocks so far
- ➖ Only a bit faster than 2080
- ➖ Needs a killer ray tracing app

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YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

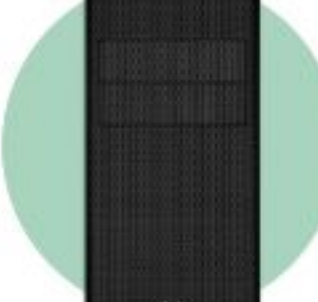
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,007

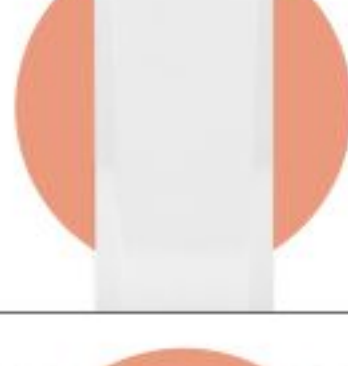
MOTHERBOARD		B360M-HDV ASRock £62 ASRock's B360M board definitely qualifies as 'no frills', but it'll still get the juice out of your CPU without bottlenecks.
PROCESSOR		Core i3-8100 Intel £121 A great processor for out-of-the-box gaming performance. Opt for the AMD Ryzen 1300X if you'd like to overclock.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Ventus 6G OC MSI £320 MSI's budget take on the RTX 2060 is lightning fast for the money, offering out-of-the-box overclocked values.
COOLER		Hyper 212 Evo CoolerMaster £26 Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB Corsair £40 16GB of RAM gives you plenty of breathing room when running multiple programs, and Corsair's selling this kit cheap.
POWER SUPPLY		CX-M Series CX550M Corsair £50 A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £38 Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £36 One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.
CASE		Neos Bitfenix £34 The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.
DISPLAY		G2460PF AOC £150 This is the cheapest 144Hz gaming monitor you can buy, yet it still offers decent image quality, great performance and Freesync.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS Pro HyperX £80 A reliable and attractive board with no added frills from HyperX – plus it'll match that Stinger Core headset. Result.
MOUSE		Rival 110 SteelSeries £20 A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.
HEADSET		Cloud Stinger HyperX £30 We love the HyperX Cloud, but at £70 it's too much for an entry-level system. The Cloud Stinger is the next best thing.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,502

MOTHERBOARD		Prime Z370 A II Asus £130 Great shielding, full of features, and featuring that – ahem – all important RGB lighting, this is a fine Asus board.
PROCESSOR		Core i5-8600K Intel £245 Six cores, six threads, good out-of-the-box clock speeds – and it's overclockable. No performance bottlenecks with this installed.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £320 Serious power from the 'just about affordable' end of Nvidia's new GPU fleet, and it's ray tracing-ready too.
COOLER		Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition Corsair £55 Tidy and quiet, the H55 will unlock our CPU's overclocking potential and look good through your case window while it does so.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666 Corsair £40 16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.
POWER SUPPLY		CX 650W Corsair £60 It may not feature fancy modular design, but Corsair's reliable CX 650 is cheap enough to accommodate for our other part picks.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £38 This is still our SSD of choice. We've kept the capacity the same as our cheaper build, but upgrading to 500GB would be ideal.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £36 SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £78 The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.
DISPLAY		Optix MAG271CR MSI £240 Curved, stylish, and offering 144Hz refresh rates, our MSI monitor pick suits pros and would-be pros alike.
KEYBOARD		One Ducky £120 A lesser known keyboard brand with a great rep among mechanical switch nerds. Ducky delivers the goods with the One.
MOUSE		G502 Proteus Spectrum Logitech £60 Logitech's revered G502 is comfortable, adjustable, and precise. Also 'Proteus Spectrum' sounds like a <i>Halo</i> map.
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £80 Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,733

MOTHERBOARD

**Strix X470-F Gaming**Asus **£180**

Get the most from the new AMD Ryzen 2700X with this matching X470 motherboard that's packed with features.

PROCESSOR

**Ryzen 7 2700X**AMD **£250**

Easy to overclock and with huge performance out of the box, AMD's new flagship CPU is the one to go for.

GRAPHICS CARD

**GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition**EVGA **£1,018**

EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.

COOLER

**Kraken X62**NZXT **£130**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY

**Ripjaws V 32GB @3200**G.Skill **£172**

G.Skill is always a safe bet for lightning fast RAM, and if you can do without the RGB frills this 2x16GB set will treat you right.

POWER SUPPLY

**HX750i 80 Plus Platinum**Corsair **£150**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD

**XPG SX8200 Pro 1TB**ADATA **£200**

A whole terabyte of M.2 storage with blistering read/write speeds, just waiting to be filled with Steam games you'll never play.

HDD

**WD Blue 4TB**Western Digital **£99**

With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE

**Enthoo Evolv ATX TG**Phanteks **£180**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY

**AW3418DW**Alienware **£779**

34 inches of curved, beautifully presented 120Hz display with the added benefits of G-Sync. One for aesthetes and athletes alike.

KEYBOARD

**K70 LUX RGB**Corsair **£115**

Even when money is no object it's hard to argue against Corsair's latest K70. A no-fuss, solid piece of aluminium craftsmanship.

MOUSE

**G502 Lightspeed**Logitech **£130**

The Lightspeed is the very latest edition of Logi's loveable G502, and while it might look familiar nearly all internal parts are new.

HEADSET

**GSP 670**Sennheiser **£330**

Sennheiser's first wireless gaming headset shoots for audiophile territory with great control placement and 16 hours of battery.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“XCOM underlines the fact that I only know about 20 real people”

The social politics of naming your **XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN** squad

This is my last Now Playing for PC Gamer. In fact, it's the last thing I'm writing for PCG full-stop, at least for now. You never know, I might write a Now Playing for issue 400, before complaining about the cover price on Instagram (this is an inside joke).

An office PA annoyingly threw all my old PC Gamer issues out, so I've been perusing the few I've got at home. I'm reading them while I'm supposed to be packing to move to Brighton. We did slightly too many lists when I was editor, but damn, each issue was packed with features. I think I gave editing this magazine a solid shot, for a 25 year-old with no qualifications

SAMUEL ROBERTS



THIS MONTH
Left PC Gamer after over five years, with several of his non-grey hairs intact.

ALSO PLAYED
Sea of Thieves, Sekiro

who didn't know what he was doing. I give my editorship 81 per cent. It was no Dragon Age 2.

Anyway, here's a filthy secret – I've been denying myself a proper XCOM 2 campaign since the game released, because I've never finished an *Enemy Unknown* campaign with the *Enemy Within* stuff installed. That is, with the mechs, deadly new aliens, that sort of thing. I thought I should do that before throwing myself at

XCOM 2, with its nine million things to micromanage. I'm enjoying it, but because I've loaded an old save file, it's presenting a few dilemmas.

Naturally, when I play XCOM, I rename all my soldiers to people I know. But there are a few problems with this. For example, my ex-girlfriend is my best sniper. I could just rename her, but I feel it breaks the theatre of the game to do that. So what do I do? Get her killed on purpose? She's a good sniper, so it's a tough call. And *Enemy Within* is

I'LL HAVE TO ADD PEOPLE WHO WANT ME TO JOIN THEIR NETWORK ON LINKEDIN



This is still such an enjoyable, straightforward turn-based game.

actually a touch harder than *Enemy Unknown* was. Now, her and my current girlfriend, a new recruit, are on the same squad. It seems wrong.

SQUAD PROBS

The other problem is I don't really know some of the other people who are in my 2014-era *XCOM* squad any more. And yet, I'm sending a bunch of them into battle. When should or shouldn't you name a game character after someone from your real life? To me, there's a kind of invisible line you cross in your head when it's someone you barely know, which is why I only pick people I regularly interact with.

And, annoyingly, I'm running out of those. My good friend Dave was just killed in service by one of the deadly guardian aliens. Now I need to cycle in someone new from the barracks. I ask, do I know anyone else? I mean, if we're getting down to acquaintances or people I sometimes chat to in corridors, it feels like I'm missing the point. Soon I'll have to add people who want me to join their network on LinkedIn.

XCOM underlines the fact that I only know about 20 real people, and that's it, which is actually probably true for most people over 30 when they really think about it. Anyway, that's my last, frivolous Now Playing, making an arbitrary point about something I could avoid entirely by renaming everyone and starting again. It's been a pleasure writing and editing for you. ■



“It's an unpleasant space to explore”

Finding beauty in **ONE FINGER DEATH PUNCH 2**

▶ PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Assaulted the eyes

ALSO PLAYED
Destiny 2

Lots of people will tell you that how a game plays is all that matters, and that's an admirable attitude that I'd love to say I agree with. In practice, though, I'm a snob. You may have crafted the stickiest, most entertaining core loop of all time, but if it's attached to an ugly game, I'm probably not going to play it.

There is one exception, and it's *One Finger Death Punch*. It's a brilliant two-button action game in which you, a kung-fu stickman, beat down hundreds of attackers. If they attack from the right, you press the right-mouse button. If they attack from the left, you press the left-mouse button. Sometimes attackers will swap sides, or require more than one button press to take down, but that's really about it. It's compulsive – an elegant dance of precision button clicks that feels great to successfully pull off.

My one wish for the sequel was that it wouldn't look like absolute ass. Unfortunately, *One Finger Death Punch 2* is just as repulsive as its

predecessor. Maybe even more so. I buy it anyway.

It's not that the art is ugly – although it is – as much as there's no coherent aesthetic. It's a grab-bag of styles, reminiscent of '70s kung-fu movies, early-'00s Newgrounds games and pretty much any era of DeviantArt. The UI icons are uninformative. The fonts are atrocious. The faux-Chinese accent of the narrator is questionable at best. It's an unpleasant space to explore.

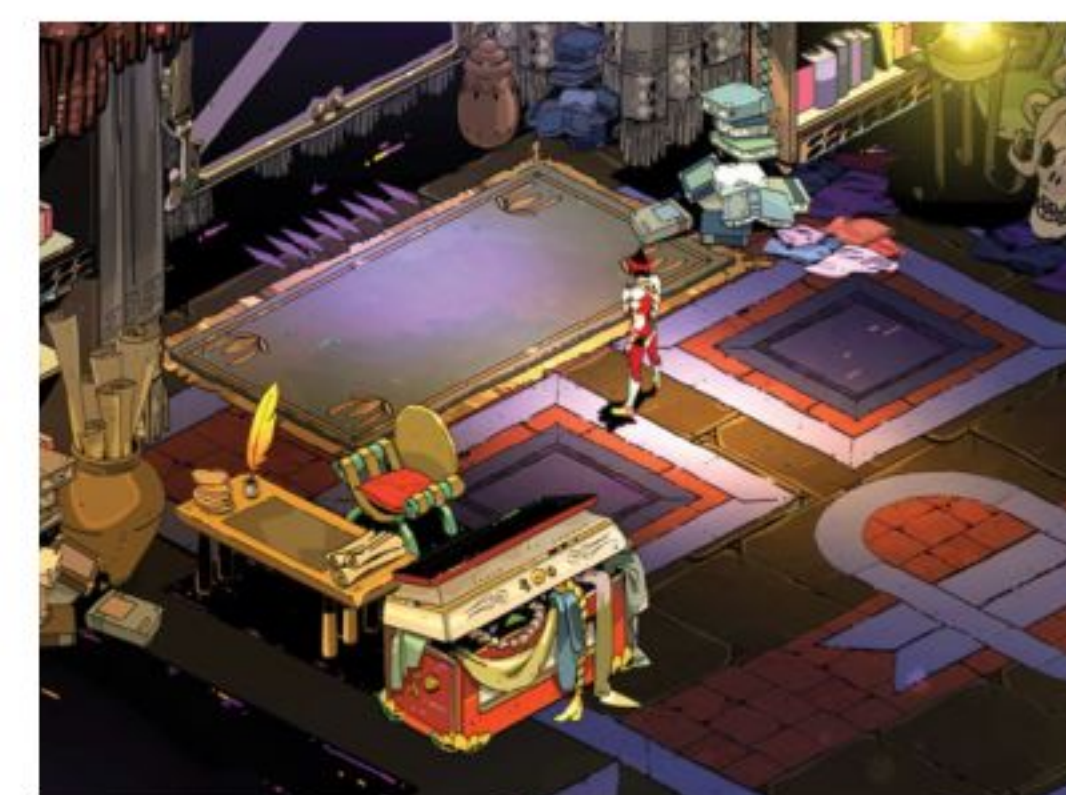
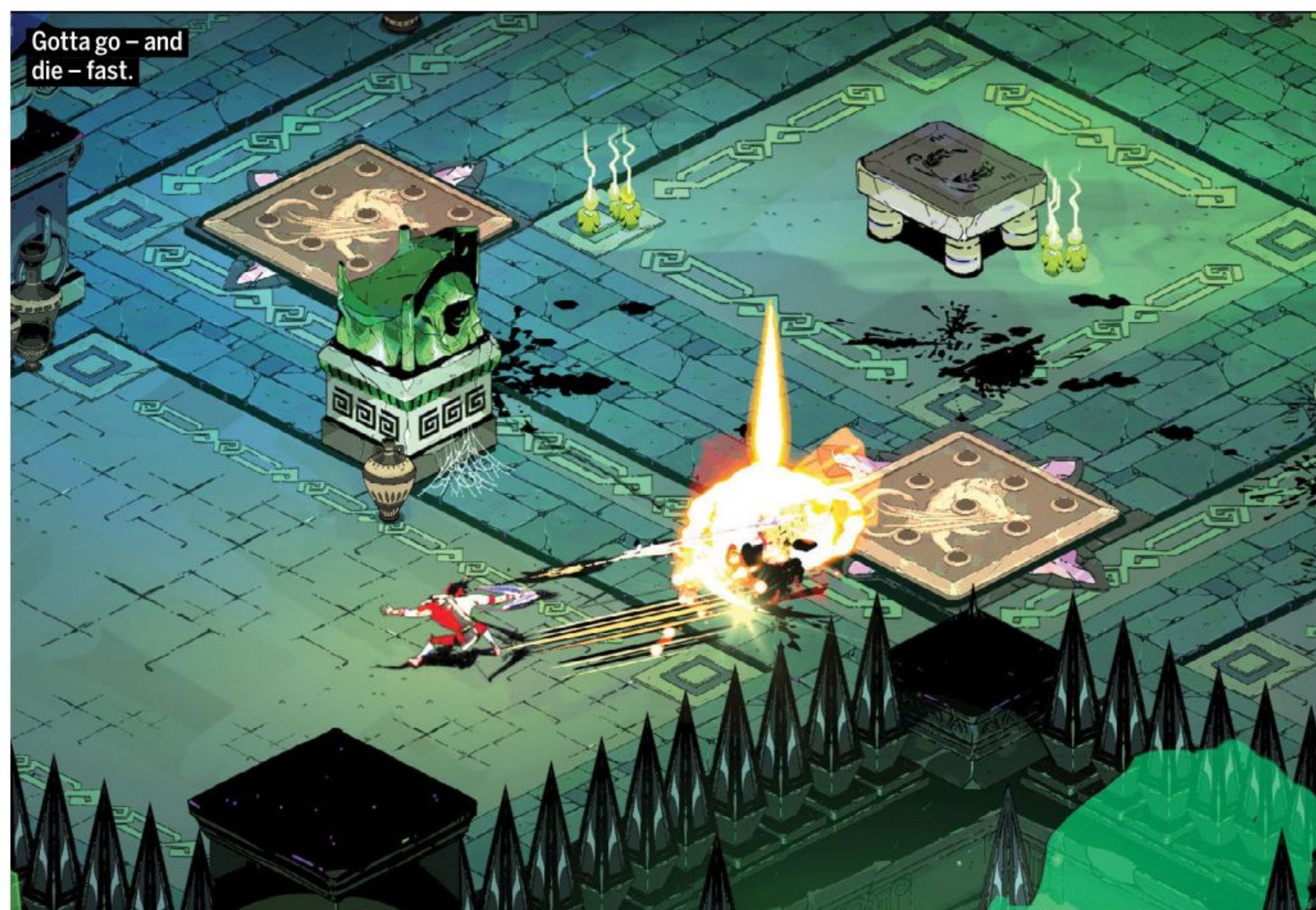
And yet, it's loads of fun. Ostensibly each level is the same – you fending off 100+ enemies without dying. Yet through the mix of different enemy types – bosses, brawlers, enemies that attack from range – each level feels like it has a specific combat flavour that makes it just different enough from the rest.

MANIC CLICKING

I think the frantic pace helps distract from how unpleasant I find its art. I'm not really looking at the level, just the incoming attack prompts shown at the bottom of the screen. Button mashing is certain death in *One Finger Death Punch 2*, and so – much like in a good rhythm action game – you tend to focus down on just the essential information. And in this limited view, the animations of the fighters even look quite graceful.

Then I win, and the ugly score screen comes into full view.

The spell is broken. I click on the next level regardless. ■



“I’m already dreaming of becoming the Hades esports champion 2020”

Going mad with (divine) power in **HADES**

I’ve recently started playing *Hades* again after having stayed away from it since launch. Supergiant Games is one of those precious few game developers whose games I will buy sight unseen, but initially I thought that not even they could make me enjoy roguelikes more than I do. Which isn’t all that much.

Then something magical happened – I got better. I know, I know, that’s the point of this type of game. And yet I often feel like roguelikes come with a skill floor that’s just too high for me to not be frustrated, and frustration gives me no reason to continue playing. But the updates kept rolling in, and with them a variety of skills and ways to meaningfully combine them that made me feel like I could perhaps actually do this. My entire journey with Supergiant titles has been like this, anxiously saying, “I’m probably not the core audience for this,” before completing the purchase anyway and subsequently falling in love.

Hades feels like a culmination of everything that the studio has done before. Combat in *Bastion* now feels like a slower version of *Hades* – a

▶ MALINDY HETFELD



THIS MONTH
Took the fight to the Greek gods

ALSO PLAYED
Godhood

speed that takes a further dip in *Transistor* in exchange for the meaningful skill combinations that I now appreciate so much. Additionally, *Hades* has the physicality and immediacy of *Pyre*, conveyed through stunning animation. I loved running in *Pyre*, and it’s the same here, paired with an incredible dodge that somehow manages to make me feel powerful while I’m running away.

More importantly, *Hades* is slowly eroding my idea of this mythical core audience, and reminded me that a genre actually doesn’t have to define a game’s difficulty. Revelations! I know I’m doing myself a disservice

HADES IS SLOWLY ERODING MY IDEA OF THIS MYTHICAL CORE AUDIENCE

by limiting myself in my gaming tastes, but I know I wouldn’t have played this if my taste weren’t already “anything by Supergiant”.

ON A GOOD RUN

Some aspects tickle my lizard hind brain in a way that feels like a dirty trick. During one run, for example, I bought a water basin on a whim, only to find it showed me my number of runs and total of slain foes. I swear I’ve never cared about high scores of any kind, and yet there it was – pride, unmistakably. The same is true for when I check the number of the furthest room reached, or when Zagreus mumbles to himself about never having made it this far before, a declaration which causes me to realise the same – almost inevitably stressing me out so much I die.

Since *Hades* is still in Early Access, these triumphs are oddly terrifying. What if a weapon in need of a nerf or a weakness in a boss enabled my success? What if all of this is a warm-up for some really difficult battles while I’m already dreaming of becoming the *Hades* esports champion 2020? Well, if I’m honest, it doesn’t matter. I haven’t squealed like this at the speed and excitement of a game in a long time. ■

“They’ve really nailed the finer details, which any great simulator should”

Failing to build a birdhouse in **WOODWORK SIMULATOR**

The developer behind PC Building Simulator has released a playable prototype of its next project, *Woodwork Simulator*, which is exactly what you think it is. I’ve had my fill of novelty simulator games on PC, but this isn’t something that’s played for laughs – it actually lets you make things out of wood, and it’s way more compelling than I thought it would be.

I was absolutely hopeless at woodwork in school. Once I tried to make a CD rack and ended up with a shapeless wedge of pine with globs of hardened glue leaking out of the cracks. Several people laughed at it, including the teacher. I was alright at sanding, though. That thing might have been a mess and too narrow to hold a CD, but boy was it smooth.

So I went into *Woodwork Simulator* thinking I’d be able to make something decent, because videogames let you excel at things you’re otherwise shit at, right? But I was wrong. So, so wrong. Because this is a simulator in the truest sense, requiring a delicate hand and some actual manual dexterity.

ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH
Made a mess with some wood

ALSO PLAYED
Heaven’s Vault

You have a bunch of different tools to work with, and they all feel fantastic to use. You can saw, drill, plane, sand, varnish, paint, and even use a lathe. Sawing by pulling the mouse back and forth feels really tactile, and I love the attention to detail, like the little curls of wood that peel off the wood when you plane it. They’ve really nailed the finer details, which any great simulator should.

The wood is enjoyably malleable, letting you cut out any shape you like and glue the bits together to create, well, whatever you like. There’s a free mode for people who prefer to dream

their own creations up, but I thought I’d ease myself in with one of the tutorials, a birdhouse, which the game declares to be easy. When I begin I see a large piece of wood marked with a template telling me which bits to cut out.

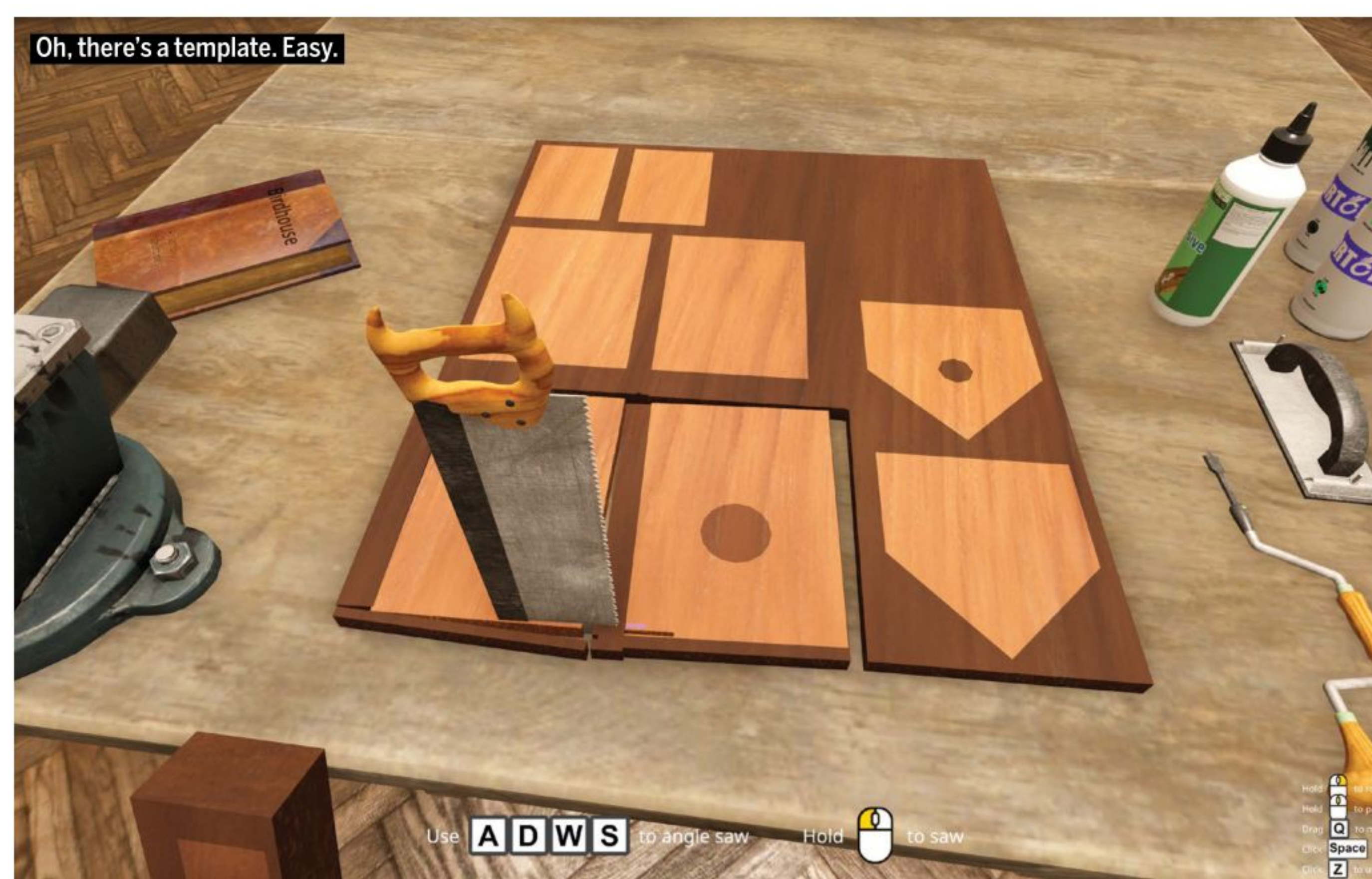
NOT CUTTING IT

I find cutting out the various shapes that make up the birdhouse quite soothing. I stick a long, square piece of wood in the lathe to turn it into a smooth post, then I start gluing the pieces I cut out together. But I underestimate how gently and precisely you have to do this, and the end result is something that makes my CD rack look like a work of art.

But it’s really fun. The simple act of cutting wood and sticking it together to make things, without worrying about getting sawdust on the floor or wood glue on my fingers, is enough of a novelty to keep me playing – even if I’m making a mockery of the art of woodcraft. And it’s remarkable to think that this is an early prototype given away for free, because there’s a lot going on in here.

I still suck at woodworking, but at least here I won’t be mocked by my teacher and classmates. ■

THIS IS A SIMULATOR IN THE TRUEST SENSE, REQUIRING A DELICATE HAND



THE SIMS 4

New character creator makes some depressing sims. *By Joanna Nelius*

I'm surprised the *Sims 4*'s new Q&A-based character creator didn't exist sooner. Hitting the randomise button when making a new Sim is always fun, but we've always had to go through the (sometimes agonising) task of picking their traits and aspirations. *The Sims 4* can now do the hard work for us. Answer a few questions, and it will figure out what kind of Sim to generate for you.

Maybe this is down to how I answered those questions, but it's generated some of the most hilariously depressing Sims I've ever seen. I've been having a fantastic time playing with them.

Once you answer a few questions in the Sim creation process, *The Sims 4* will automatically pick an aspiration, personality traits, a job (or lack thereof), two skill sets, and some Simoleons. You generally start out with 20,000 Simoleons, unless the story mode gives you more money. That happened with the unemployed, aspiring public enemy it created for me. That guy started with 30,000. Of course the unemployed guy whose life goal is to be hated by other Sims starts off with more money.

After going through the create-a-Sim a few times, it starts to become apparent which questions give you certain aspirations and personality traits, like this one:

Question: I see trash all over the beach, what do I do?

Answer: Nothing, because it reminds me of home.

Slob trait added.

The first character *The Sims 4* made for me tapped into memories I thought I had long suppressed. Memories of overhearing my family's whispered conversations about my college major and how I'd end up living in someone's basement closet eating leftover ramen from public park trash cans if I pursued it as a career. I wanted to be, gasp, a writer.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE September 2, 2014	DEVELOPER Maxis
PUBLISHER EA	LINK www.thesims.com

And what kind of Sim did the game generate for me? A Sim who wants to be fabulously wealthy while working on a freelancer writer's salary. I snorted at my screen and heard my mother's voice come out of my mouth when I said, "Yeah, good luck with that." But hey, this is *The Sims*, where being fabulously wealthy on a writer's salary is 100 per cent possible because of a little thing called diverse income.

I moved my Sim into a tiny house on Mua Pel'am right at the base of a volcano, even though the bathroom was just a fancier version of an outhouse. Even though I had to sell some of my furniture to buy a computer. Even though there was the risk of the volcano exploding and setting my house on fire. You're not a real writer unless your life causes you pain in some way.

Because my Sim was a freelance writer, they started with a writing

skill of three. They didn't make enough money from their career, so I had them plant pineapple trees, coconut trees, and other plants in their backyard to diversify their income. My neighbours would come over and tend to my garden without asking. The volcano erupted on a near-daily basis and dropped multiple molten rocks near my house that I could mine for gems and crystals to sell. If I hadn't locked my neighbours out of my house, they would have been able to put out a fire in my kitchen that started from one of those molten rocks.

PAYING THE BILLS

After about a month of hard work (in Sims time), I was able to get a promotion to regular contributor and save up enough money to buy a queen sized bed and a metal folding chair to go with my cheap kitchen table (which also increased my

YOU'RE NOT A REAL WRITER UNLESS YOUR LIFE CAUSES YOU PAIN

household bills). I'm also now an adept enough writer to start writing non-fiction books and sell my work directly to a publisher for what probably amounts to 0.000002 per cent royalties. I've forgone any kind of social or romantic life to just to get my money reserve up to 10,000 Simoleons – and half of that came from selling all of the stuff I grew in my backyard.

I'll eventually get my Sim to the ultimate Fabulously Wealthy milestone, which is to have a total of 250,000 Simoleons. They'll be proof that a freelancer writer can get rich, so long as they only spend a little of their time writing, pick up constant odd jobs, rely on the kindness of neighbours, and live in the shadow of a dangerous volcano.

If I want to get there as fast as possible, I have to plant more coconut trees, hope the volcano spits out more molten rocks, and I can never move to a different house, and I can't upgrade anything in the house, ever. Or maybe I'll just focus on playing that unemployed mean guy. He seems to be having fun all the time, the jerk. ■

NEW FACES

Three more losers *The Sims 4* made for me



UNEMPLOYED
Materialistic, and wants everyone to hate him. Would definitely have an anime avatar on the Twitter.



SECRET AGENT
Didn't think there's much need to go undercover as a Freddie Mercury impersonator, but here we are.



CRIMINAL
This mer-man is mean, evil, and does not want to be a part of your world. He just wants to steal it.

Freelance tip: exploit your neighbours for profit.



Being a writer is 25% playing *The Sims*.



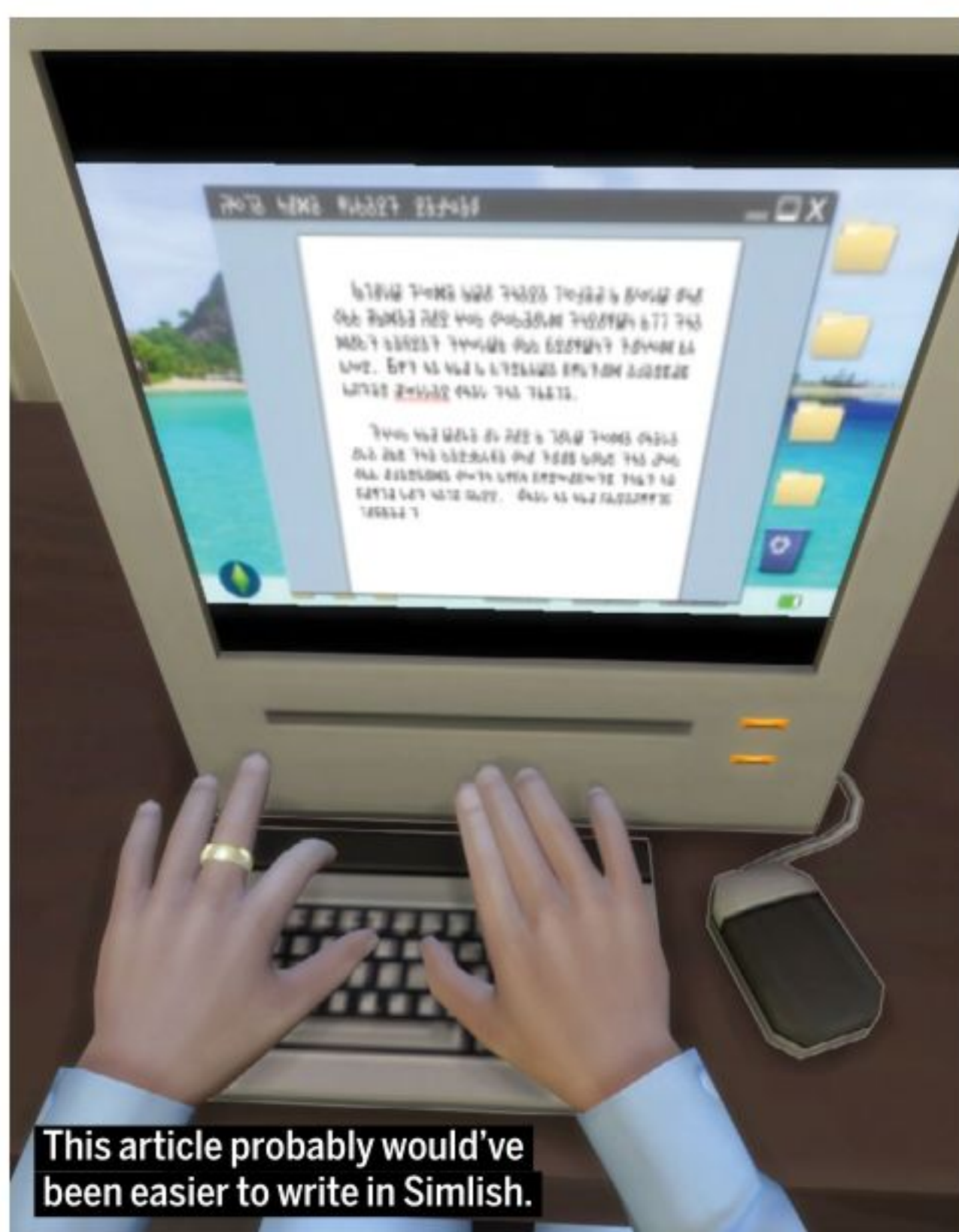
So much for the cheque being in the post.



Molten rocks can be a valuable source of income.



This article probably would've been easier to write in Simlish.



MANAGEMENT SIMS

A genre about telling others what to do. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

Management simulation is a term for any game in which you decide what happens with a thing you've been given, which in my opinion makes it nothing short of the truest

form of gaming. Factories, farms, theme parks – you can manage all of these. If you don't have a clue what doing the actual job is like and don't want to know either, but still want to try your hand at being the boss, this is the genre for you.



START HERE

TWO POINT HOSPITAL

I started here, with *Two Point's* precursor *Theme Hospital*, and it made me a genre fan for life. Here, fun comes less from helping nobbly-nosed people overcome

fantastical diseases, and more from padding your pockets.

Management can sound drab and technical, but *Two Point Hospital* made a place everyone hates just the right amount of silly.

DIG DEEP

DWARF FORTRESS

➔ If you can overcome the way this controls, you will come to feel deeply for your fortress and your dwarves through amazing textual description and painstaking micromanaging.



MEDDLE WITH MACHINES

FACTORIO

➔ If you love immersing yourself in small details, *Factorio* is your game. Factories are oft-hated places in games – dark, polluted locations where monsters frequently hide – but the factories of *Factorio* are marvels made up of tiny pieces. There's a steep learning curve, but you too can build a monster of conveyor belt veins that is nothing short of hypnotic to watch.

EMBODY EVIL

DUNGEON KEEPER II

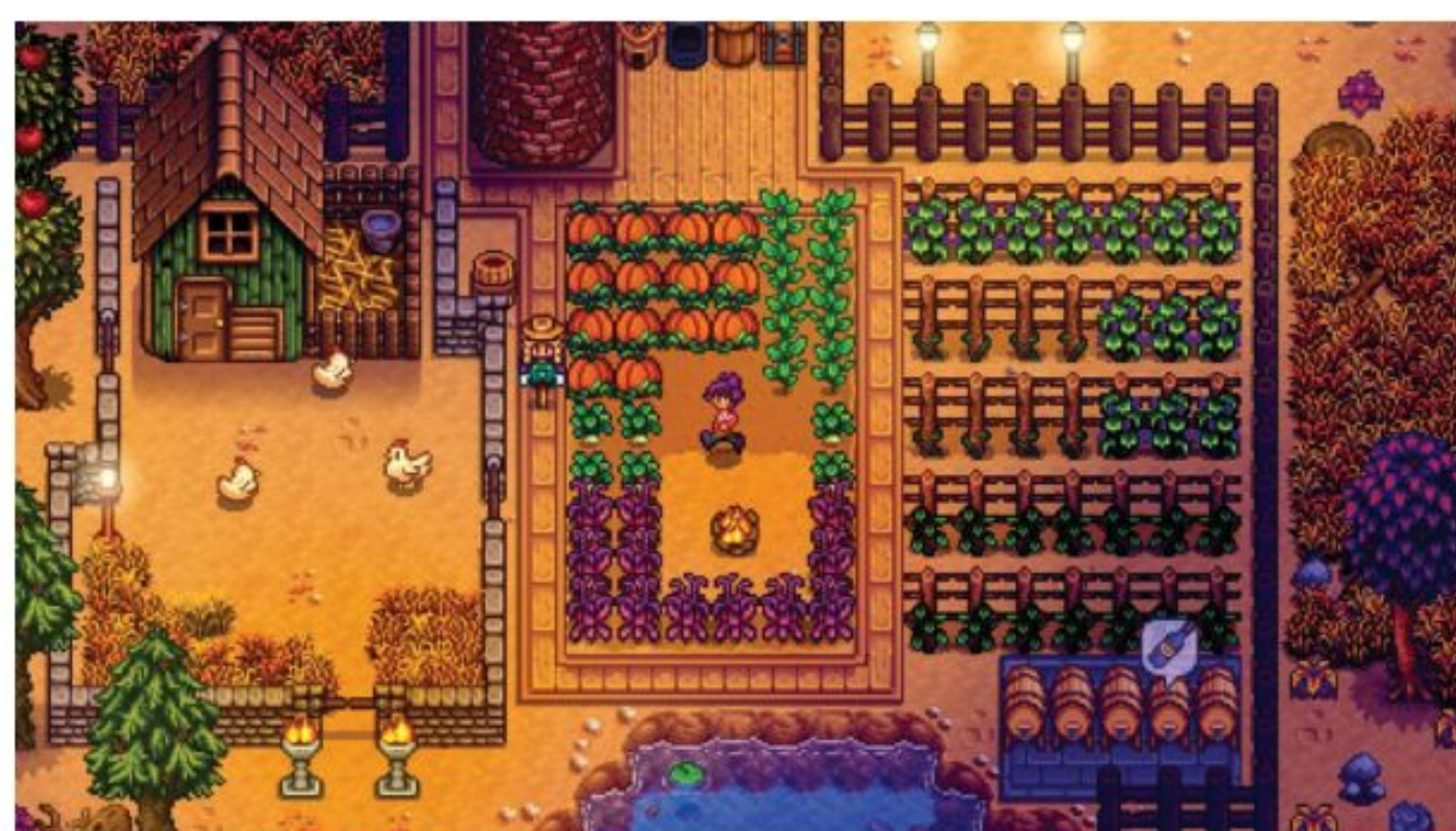
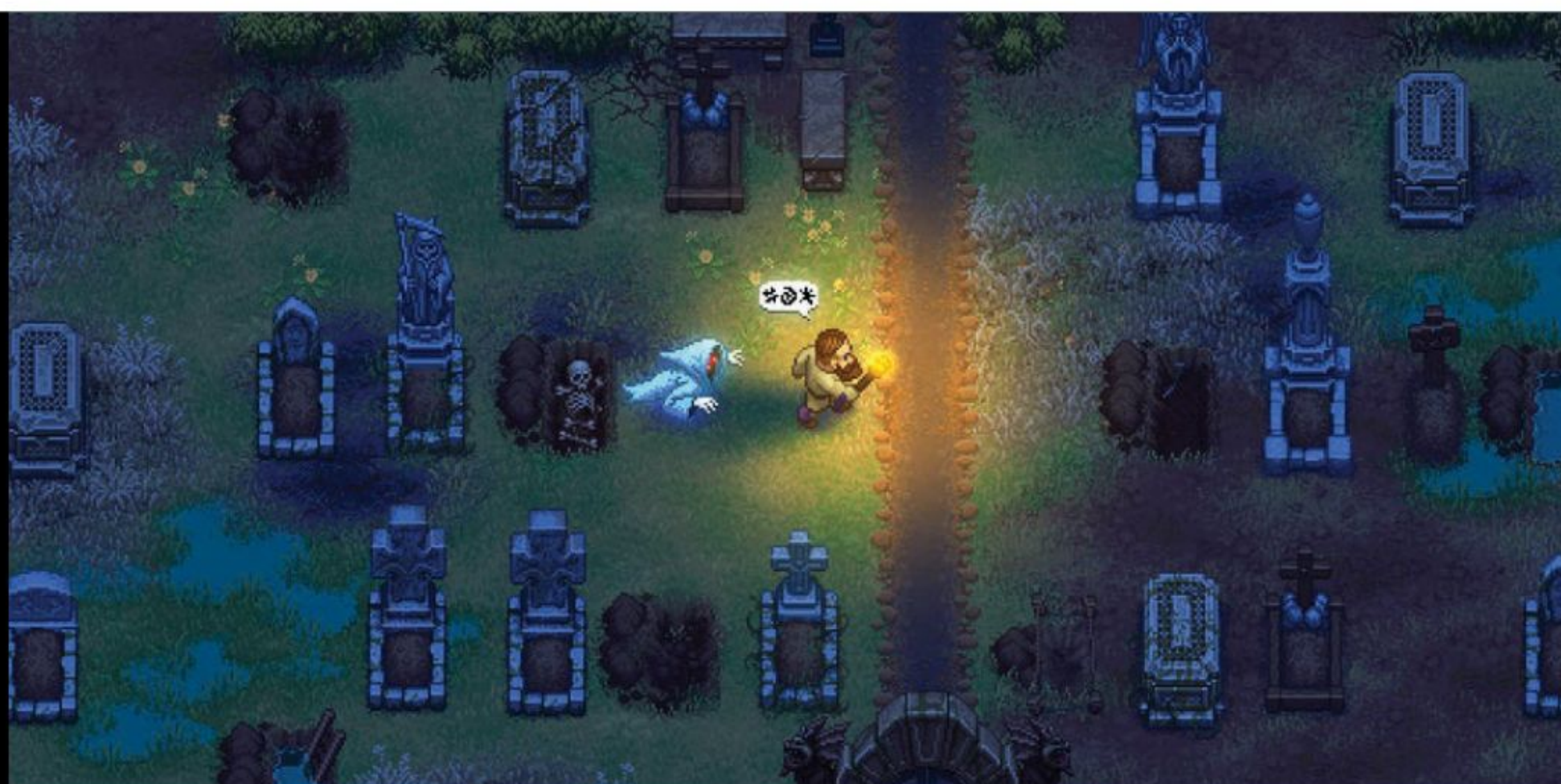
➔ Most manageable buildings or cities depict real-life equivalents, but here you build your own fantasy dungeon to attract demons to your army. Once everyone's needs have been met, vampires, skeletons and other dark forces will fight some knights for you.



AVOID THIS

GRAVEYARD
KEEPER

The idea to manage a graveyard is sound, but *Graveyard Keeper* is terrible at player guidance. Add to this a sense of humour that aims for silly and ends up being crass, and you're better off letting this one rest in peace.



ALL-NIGHTER

STARDEW VALLEY

➔ The list would not be complete without the farming sim that reminds you to take a break and relax, which is what you wish you had done when the clock strikes 2am and you're still watering crops or fishing, smelting gold bars or exploring the mines. There is so much to do, and the human element in meeting a diverse cast of characters and finding your place is just heart-warming.

DESIGN FUN

ROLLERCOASTER
TYCOON DELUXE

➔ Whereas elsewhere on this list I've referred you to spiritual successors and newer entries, here nothing but the original will do. *Rollercoaster Tycoon* gives you just the right amount of tools to build behemoths of rollercoasters that will make people lose their lunch – and then come back for more.



TOP TIPS

Taking the first steps



1 PLAY THE TUTORIAL

Most management games come with a tutorial and I'd recommend using it, even if you wait with certain parts of the tutorial until they're relevant. This way you'll know the most common scenarios.



2 CHECK THE MAP

Know your surrounding area in order to find resources or map out the shape of what you're building. That way, your creation won't end up looking haphazard and you'll keep transport routes short.



3 DON'T OVERDO IT

The temptation is always to build everything immediately, but you need to make sure you have the resources and the need for new buildings or machines first, otherwise you'll just end up wasting money.



PURIST'S CHOICE

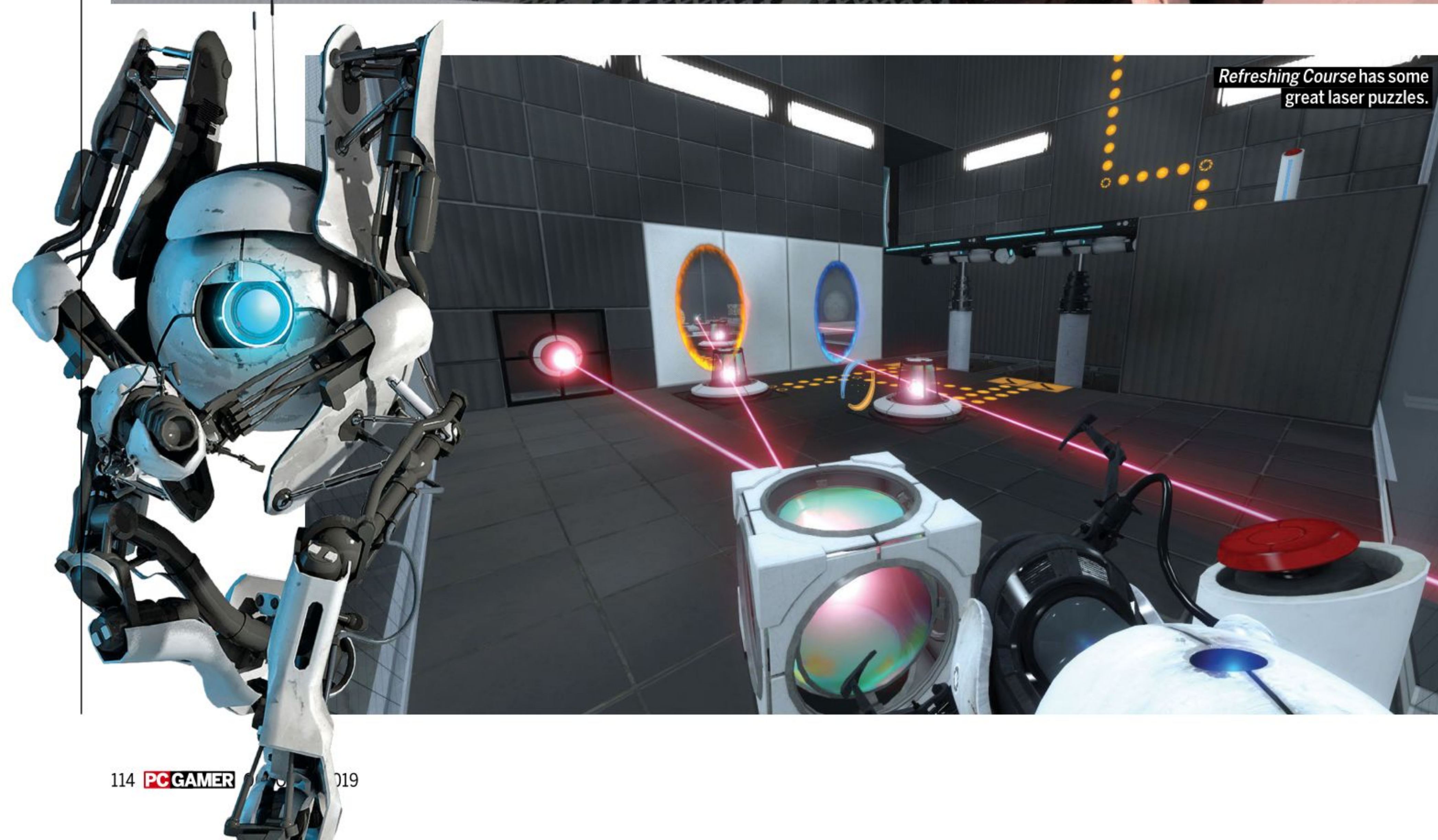
ANNO 1800

The *Anno* series has been around since 1998 but since then, not a whole lot has changed. Sure, we've gone to the future and back, but *Anno*, much like its cousin *Tropica*, focuses on the core of the city-building experience – you build a city in real-time and then you try to keep its populace happy and well fed. *Anno 1800* is likely the prettiest instalment yet and comes with tourism management options new to the series.

The gels tend to be underserved by the *Portal* community.



Refreshing Course has some great laser puzzles.





PORTAL 2

Taking on the community test-chambers. *By Rick Lane*

It's been eight years since Valve released a singleplayer game. Hopes of seeing the *Half-Life* series completed have all-but vanished, and we're unlikely to see another *Left4Dead* or *Portal*. Yet while Valve the developer may have turned toward enormously successful MOBAs and enormously unsuccessful card battlers, its last great singleplayer game still has a surprising amount of life left in it, courtesy of its community.

Since *Portal 2* made its debut in April 2011, the community has designed more than half a million custom test-chambers, with dozens of new chambers being added every day. The majority of these are singleplayer chambers (although that still leaves over 100,000 cooperative chambers if you and a buddy have got a lifetime to kill). It's an enormously prolific community, to the point where it can be hard to know where to begin expanding your Aperture adventures. Hence, I've selected a handful of the best chambers to showcase what the community offers.

When starting out your extracurricular *Portal 2* activities, you're best off looking for multi-part campaigns rather than individual chambers. It's the easiest way to ensure a consistent quality in the chambers, with the puzzles evolving and changing based upon earlier ideas the designer had. There are plenty such campaigns to choose from, but a handful are a cut above.

12 Angry Tests sees you guided through a suite of elegantly designed test-chambers by a dysfunctional turret gone rogue. A full-fledged campaign with its own story, *12 Angry Tests* boasts a healthy mixture of the various *Portal 2* environments, and plenty of inventive puzzles that

make full use of the mechanics that *Portal 2* offers (including some excellent use of light-bridges).

What makes it stand out, however, are all the Valve-like moments that occur along the way. It begins with a fun, Valve-style cold-open that plays out almost like a parody of 2017's *Prey*. There's also a fantastic sequence where you ride a particle-elevator through a vast vertical chamber lined with turrets.

Designed For Danger is a similarly accomplished adventure. It kicks off in the middle of *Portal 2*'s vanilla story, segueing cleverly into a

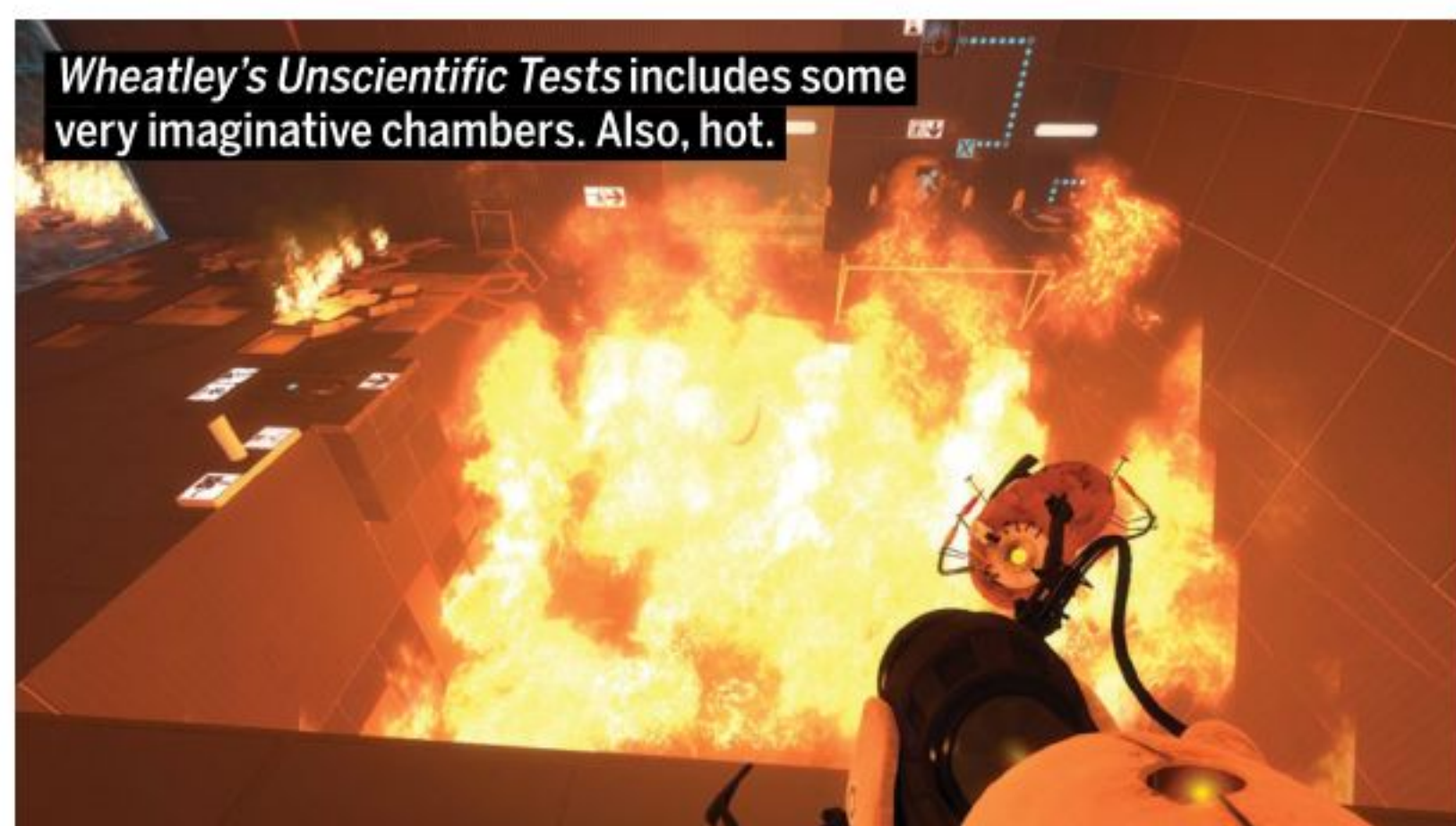
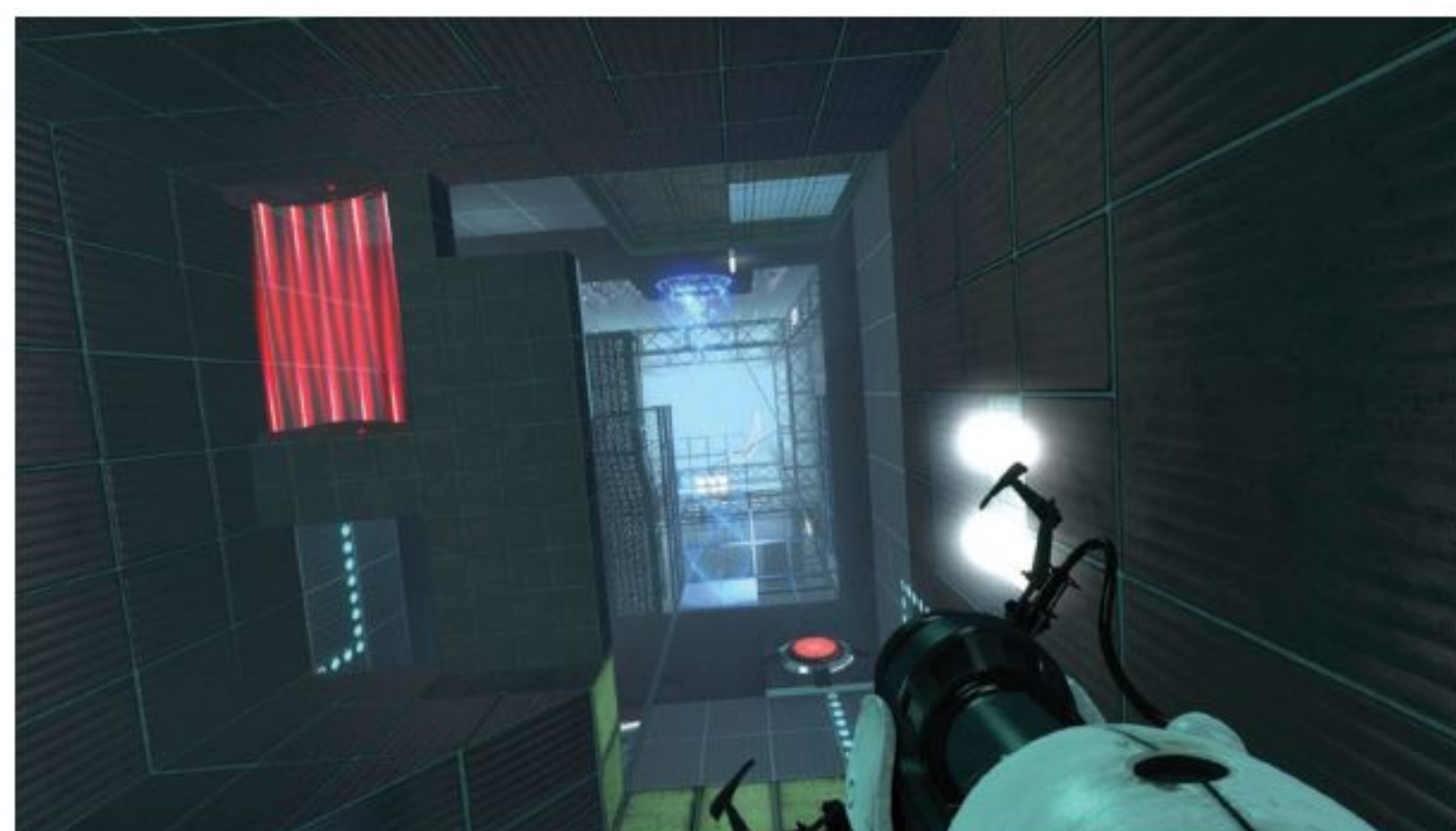


12 ANGRY TESTS BOASTS A HEALTHY MIXTURE OF THE VARIOUS PORTAL 2 ENVIRONMENTS

side-campaign where a rootin'-tootin' AI core called Rick takes you on a thrilling (and extremely dangerous) series of test-chambers. Puzzle-wise, there a strong focus on cube manipulation, but it also has a real eye for grandeur. There's lots of exploring the space between the walls, while a later chamber that takes you into Aperture's dilapidated underbelly is truly breathtaking.

MULTI-STAGE CHAMBERS

Another campaign well worth checking out is *Refreshing Course*. Unlike the previous campaigns I mentioned, this one doesn't have much of a story. Instead it has large and hugely detailed chambers absolutely crammed with puzzles. These start out as short, individual vignettes, gradually broadening into elaborate multi-stage chambers where you need to work out the puzzle's sequence step by step. Quick »



Wheatley's Unscientific Tests includes some very imaginative chambers. Also, hot.

word of warning, however, the last chamber has a devious trick puzzle that implies you need to do some complex portal-jumping when you actually don't.

All these adventures are very well made in a general sense, but they basically exist for people who want a little bit more of the *Portal 2* campaign. If you're after something a bit different, there are a couple of alternatives. One of the most aesthetically pleasing map campaigns around is *Decay*, a short campaign in three parts that doubles down on the ramshackle style of *Portal 2*'s first third. It's a relatively challenging set of levels, with puzzles that revolve mainly around lasers. But each test chamber looks beautifully grimy and unkempt, including some fabulous use of vegetation. If you're a fan of the moodier elements of *Portal 2*'s atmosphere, *Decay* is a must.

If, on the other hand, you're more into *Portal* for the surreal spatial manipulation, then you should check out *Unreal Chamber*, another three-part campaign that focuses on a specific element of *Portal 2*. *Unreal Chamber* is particularly interesting because it uses the portal technology in new ways. A typical example is a room with an archway in the centre which alters the layout of the room depending upon which way you enter it. Later on, *Unreal Chamber* introduces 'Portal Frames' windows into another room which, when you press your nose against the glass, will transport you instantly into the room you were looking in. It's a very clever twist on *Portal 2*'s main mechanic.

As for individual chambers, well, few *Portal 2* maps are truly individual 'chambers'. The community seems implicitly aware that players are less likely to download a map that only lasts a few minutes.

Hence, the majority of individual chambers will comprise two or three puzzles at a minimum.

Nonetheless, there are plenty of individual chambers worth checking out. The best tend to focus on a specific theme. I particularly liked Ben 77's *Connection and Conversion* chambers, as they make heavy use of the gels and the 1950s Aperture Science areas, both of which seem quite under-used by the *Portal 2* community. I also enjoyed *Expendable Human Launch Vehicle*, a lofty and atmospheric map dedicated to punting yourself through portals like a fleshy Nerf dart.

The community's desire to cram as much into a single Source map as possible has led to some fascinating designs. A recurring theme in *Portal 2* map design is puzzle 'towers', collections of puzzles stacked vertically in order to get the most out



THEY MAKE HEAVY USE OF THE GELS AND THE 1950S APERTURE SCIENCE AREAS

of the map's available space. One of the best vertical puzzle designers is Skyferret, who has designed at least three puzzle towers. The best is *Verteron 2*, a gloriously moody-looking map wreathed in electric blue. Not only does it have a wide variety of puzzles neatly balanced in terms of challenge, it's also stuffed full of secret areas, and even features a cameo from everyone's favourite idiot AI, Wheatley.

Speaking of Wheatley, the blue-eyed moron features regularly in community maps, and is even the face of several campaigns. This includes a Skyferret-designed campaign called *Wheatley's Reprisal*. This is well worth a look both for its puzzles and the way it uses *Portal 2*'s destructibility and animation. Floors

crumble beneath your feet, chambers smash into walls and other chambers. It's filled with the dramatic environmental manipulation that was so impressive when *Portal 2* originally launched.

Be warned, however, the way *Wheatley's Reprisal* re-uses Stephen Merchant's lines from the game may cause you some aural distress.

BROADER FICTION

All the available *Portal 2* maps can be easily downloaded through the Steam workshop. It's worth downloading a few at once, as even the biggest maps won't last you more than ten to twenty minutes, and *Portal 2* lets you load up a new chamber once you've completed it. Also, once you've finished a map, delete it, as the more maps you have downloaded, the longer it takes the list to fill up each time you boot the game.

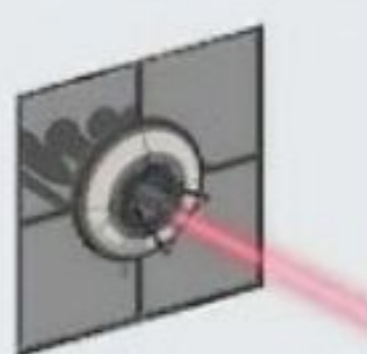
What's interesting about *Portal 2*'s maps is how well most of them fit into the broader fiction of *Portal* and Aperture Science. It rarely feels like you're playing a mod, and more like you're exploring another nook of Aperture Science's impossibly vast underground labyrinth.

It's also a stark reminder of just how fantastic Valve's worldbuilding is. It says a lot that most maps which attempt to take *Portal* out of Aperture Science don't really work, which is why I've focussed on maps that stay within the confines of Chell's scientific prison.

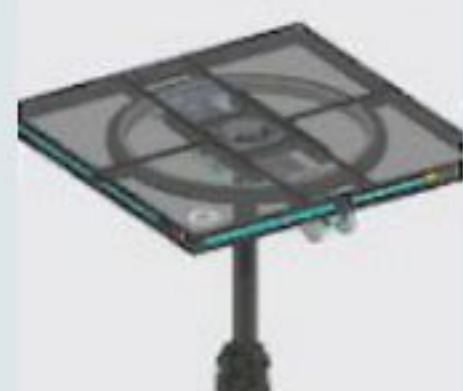
Portal 2 is still the best first-person puzzler around. But thanks to the community, it's also now the biggest, offering literally hundreds of hours of chin-scratching fun. It's not quite the same as having a new, good-old-fashioned Valve game to tear through, but a large portion of the community's designs are surprisingly effective in providing that uniquely Valve blend of surprise, wonder, and humour. ■

PORTAL 2'S PUZZLING COMPONENTS, RATED

Portal 2 has a bunch of components additional to the portals themselves. But which is the most fun to play with?



DEADLY LASERS
The vanilla ice-cream of *Portal 2*. Pew, pew.
6/10



LIGHT-BRIDGES
Mind-bending and highly versatile.
8/10



EXCURSION FUNNELS
Fun in theory but fiddly in practice.
5/10



REPULSION GEL
It's like having a trampoline but in liquid form. Boing!
9/10



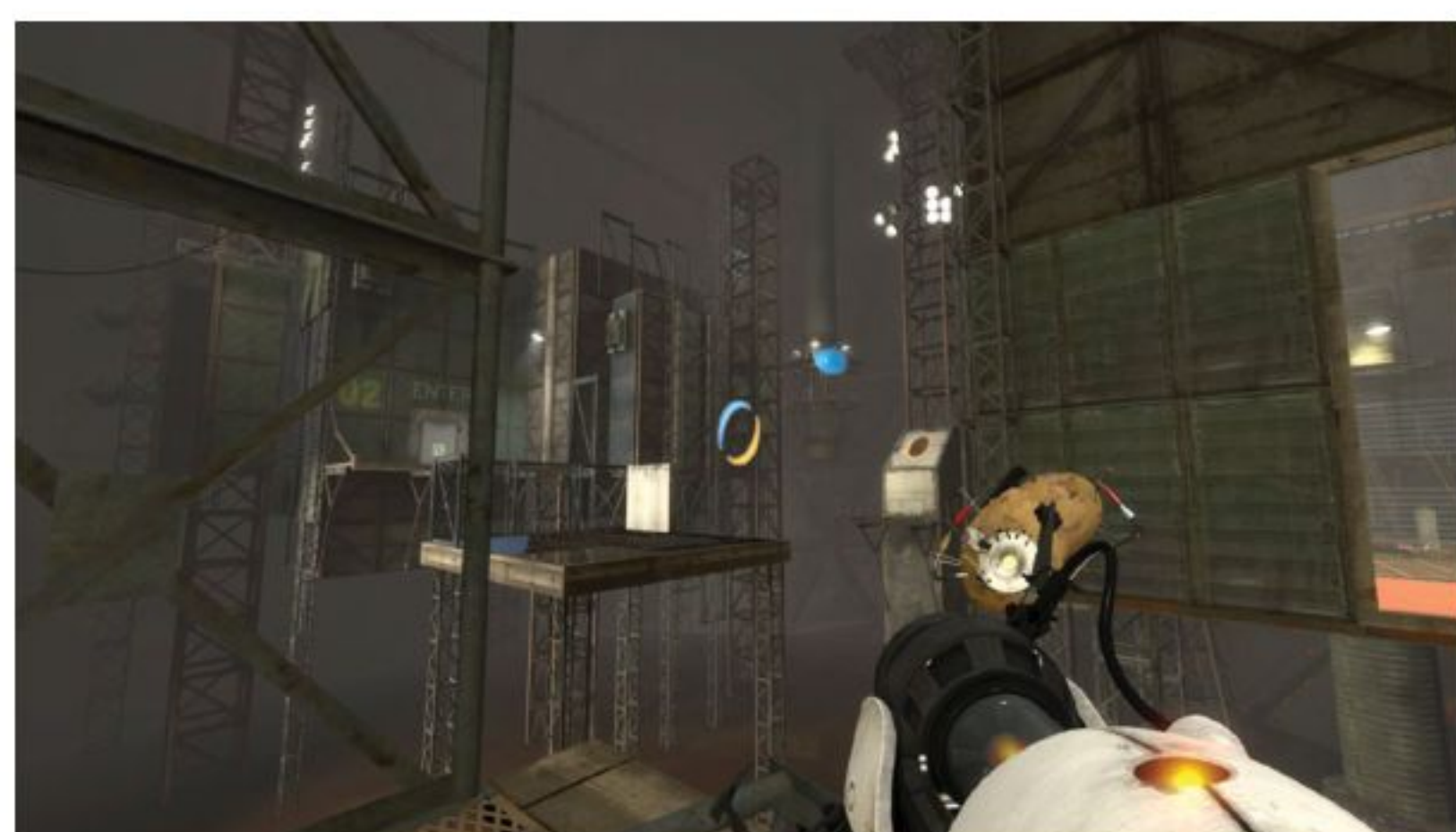
SPEED GEL
Speeds you up like Roadrunner. Meep-meep.
9/10



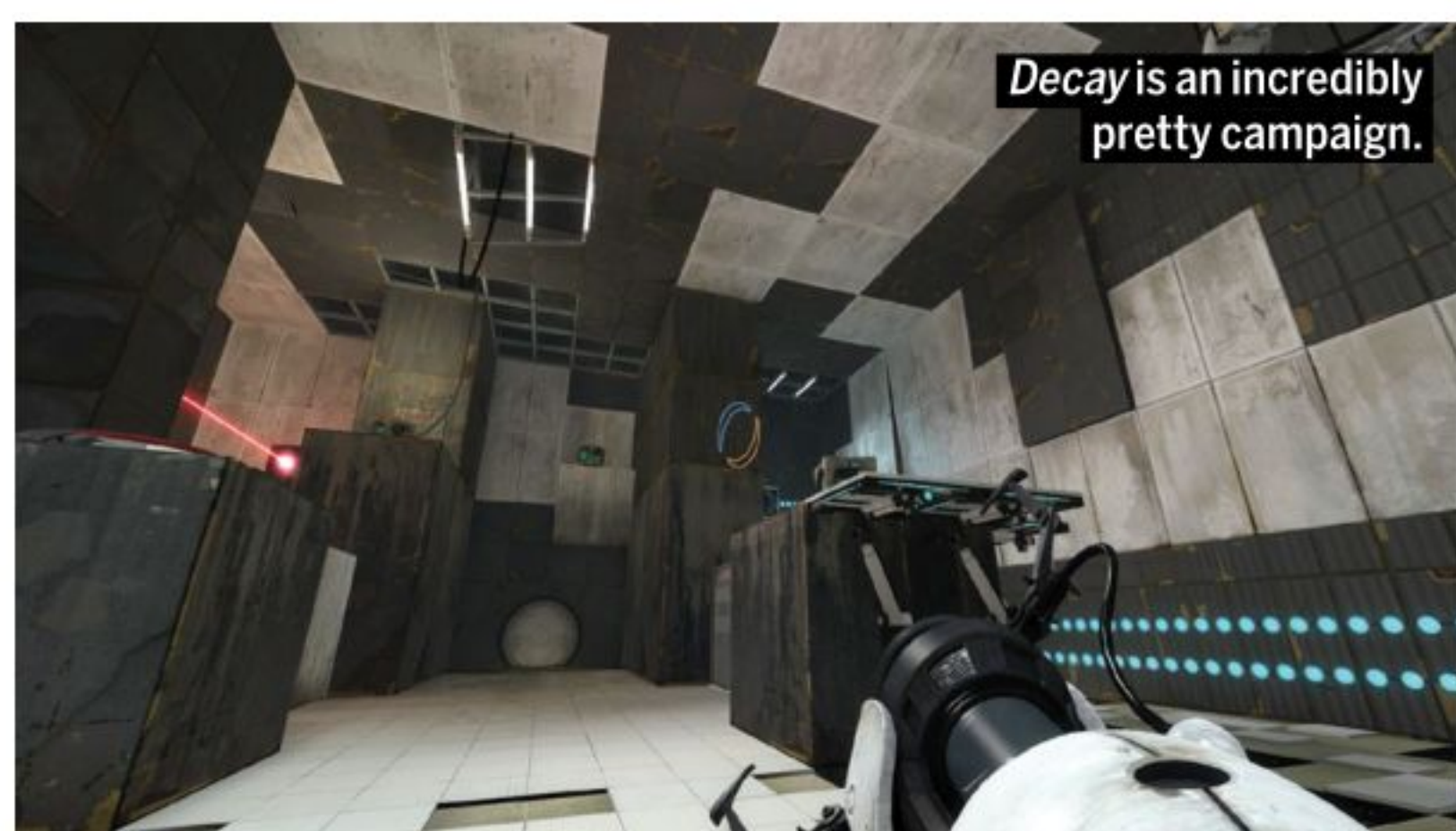
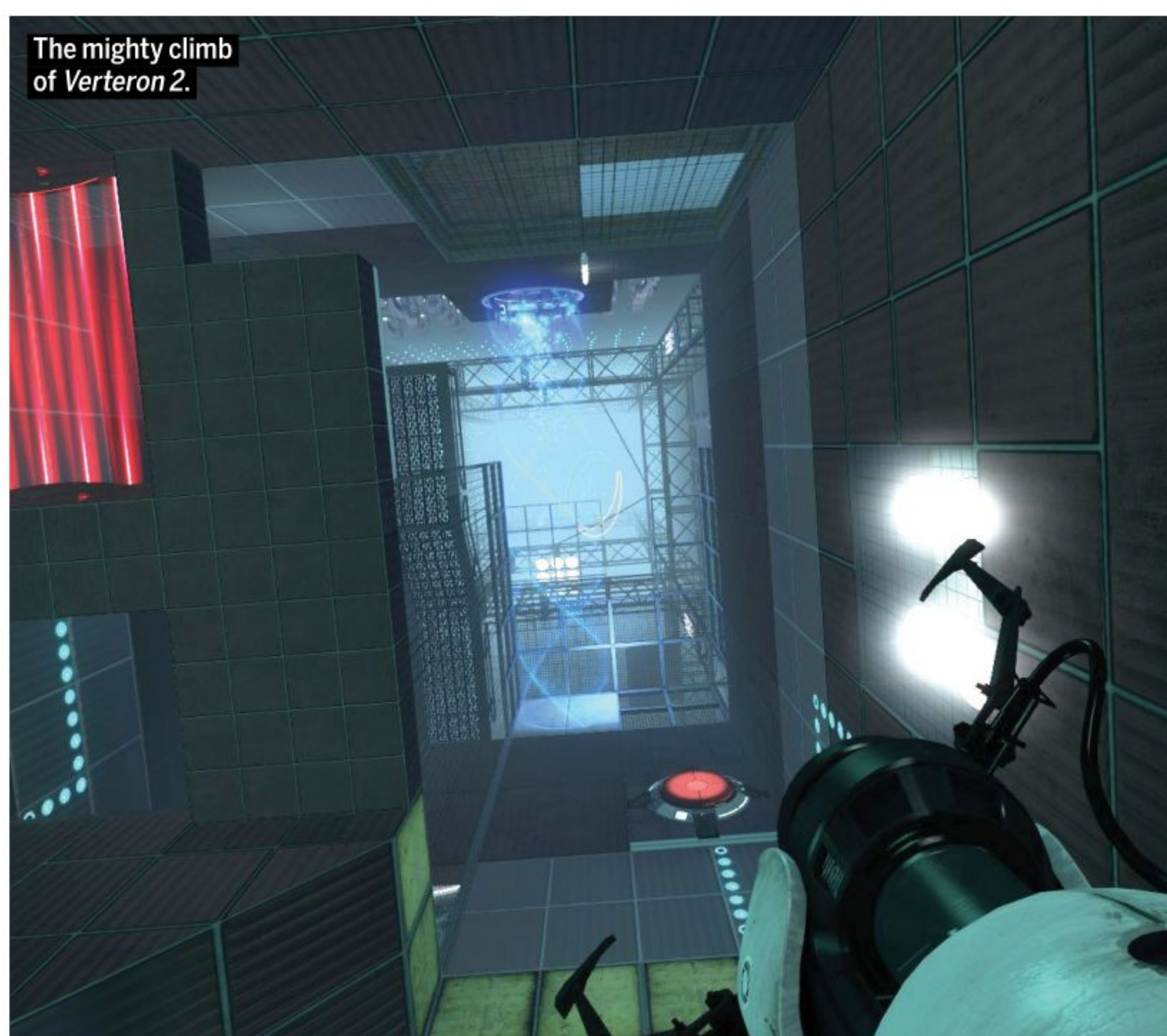
CLEANING GEL
This is just boring. Who really wants to be 'clean'?
2/10



PORTAL GEL
IT'S A PAINT PARTY! And everyone's invited!
10/10



The mighty climb
of Verteron 2.



Decay is an incredibly
pretty campaign.



Designed For Danger has
some truly breathtaking moments.



HITMAN LOTTO

PART I

Killing targets with random weapons in IO Interactive's stealth sandbox.

By Rick Lane

THE RULES

- 1 Weapons chosen via a lotto spinner.
- 2 One weapon per target.
- 3 No reloads except upon death.

I never get the most out of sandbox games, because I'm always looking for the 'right' way to do something. If a game like *Deus Ex* has optional stealth, I will do everything I can to ghost that sucker, while if a game suggests a way of completing an open objective, I will follow that method to the bitter end. Nowhere have I struggled with this more than IO Interactive's recent *Hitman* games. Their sandboxes are bigger and more choice abundant than most, yet I cannot bring myself to mess around with any of it.

In a bid to make myself think creatively, I had an idea. I bought a cheap bingo set that includes a spinning lotto machine. My plan is to look up every weapon on every *Hitman* level, assigning each a number corresponding to the numbers in my lotto machine. At the outset of a mission, I'll spin the machine once for every target on the level. Whatever number falls out, that's the weapon I must use to eliminate that particular target, no matter how noisy, conspicuous or absurd it may be.

For the purposes of this escapade, I'm playing *Hitman 2* with the legacy pack installed, mainly because it's tidier. I'm playing the vanilla *Hitman* campaign in sequence with the exception of the tutorial mission. I'll start each mission with the same equipment, a silenced pistol, fibre wire, some coins, and whatever the default disguise is for the mission. I'm also adding a sniper-rifle as a smuggled item, as they tend not to appear in the game.

While I can only kill targets with the specified weapon, for non-targets I can use whatever the situation requires. I'm also only allowed to reload a save if I die. As for the weapon list, it includes anything that can be picked up and used as a weapon in a *Hitman* level.

I've also added 'Falling' and 'Drowning' to the list, as both of those can be performed on most targets. I'm going to get out of my bad habits if it kills me. Or at least, if it kills a lot of other people.

SHARP FASHION

It's Paris Fashion Week and my targets are Viktor Novikov and Dalia Margolis, who are using the show as a front for auctioning terrorist strikes. I'm here to put an end to the bidding, permanently. Time to spin the wheel.

The first ball to roll out of my machine is number eight. According to my list that's a kitchen knife, a long-standing *Hitman* staple that I'll soon be using to staple Viktor Novikov to a wall.

The second ball is 15, a wrench. Hardly the most exciting weapon in *Hitman*'s list, but it will mean getting up close and personal to Margolis, which I remember from my previous playthrough to be tricky.

Novikov first. He's wandering around the show floor with a bodyguard in tow, so I'll need to separate the two. I also need to acquire the knife, so naturally I start looking for the kitchen.

I head into the bar, where I notice event staff wandering around. I'll need a uniform to get into the kitchen, so I continue out into the garden finding a flight of stairs leading to the basement. Two event workers are having a smoke break at the bottom. I overhear them chatting

about how Novikov's preferred cocktail is something called a Bareknuckle Boxer. I file this for later.

One of the workers returns upstairs. The other walks through the door leading into the basement. I follow him and quietly knock him out, stealing his uniform and dumping his unconscious body in a crate. I wander through the underground vaults before stumbling into the kitchen. After a minute of poking around I find a kitchen knife. I also find a wrench in a storage area adjacent to the kitchen, which is nice stroke of luck.

I head back upstairs, a plan forming in my mind. Behind the bar is a food-prep area. In the far corner is a box of rat poison. I pick one up and head to the bar, making up a Bareknuckle Boxer with one extra special mixer. Then I wait until Novikov arrives for his drink, and dash to the nearby men's room, hiding in a cupboard.

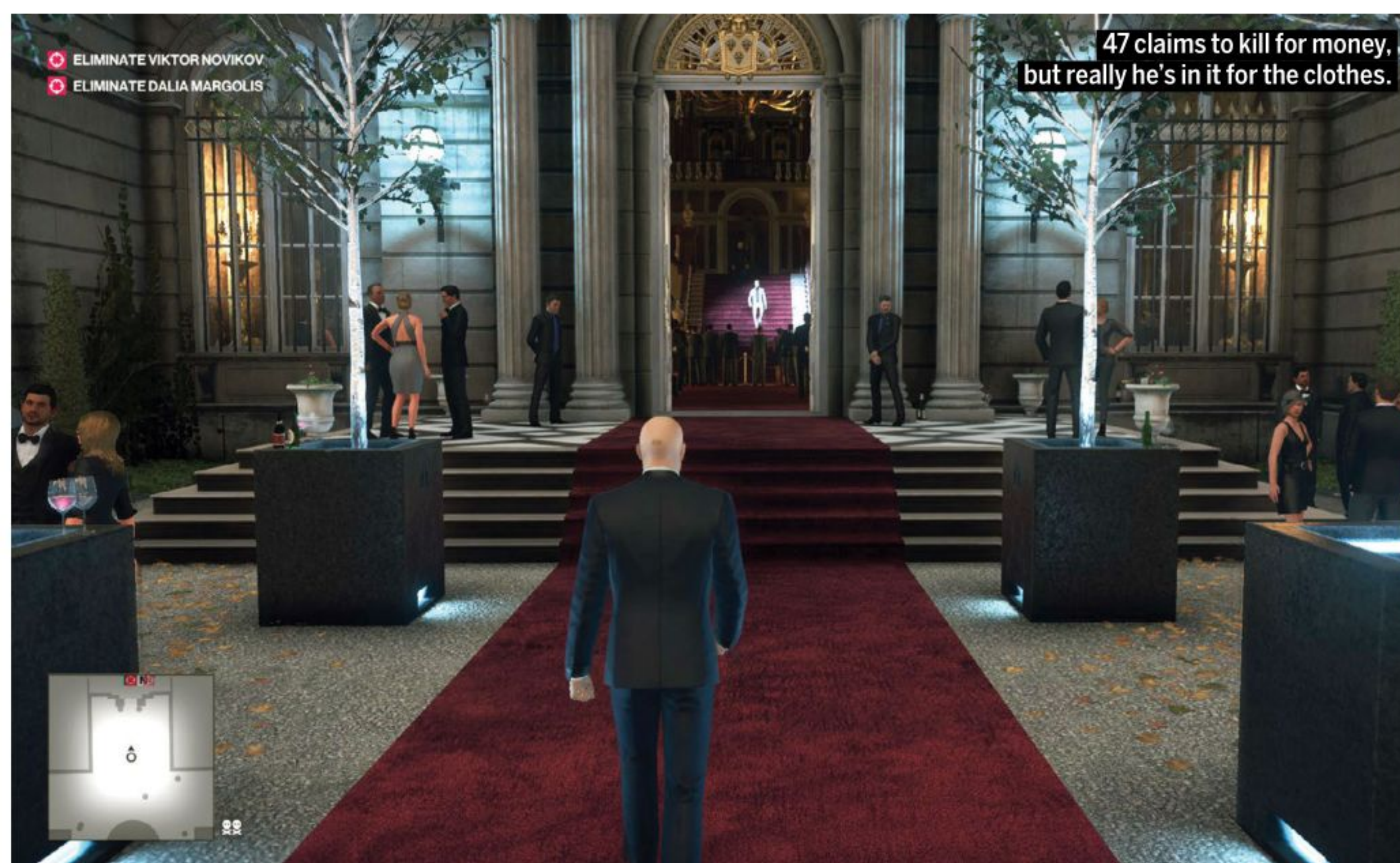
It isn't long before Novikov stumbles through the door and deposits several ounces of featherweight champion into the toilet. The rest is easy. Knife. Throat. Dead. I stuff the body in the cupboard and leave. A clean job. But if I'm honest, that's roughly how I offed Novikov the first time I played, only that time I drowned him in his own sick.

In truth, I'd forgotten about the bodyguard, and trying to navigate that problem threw me back into my old patterns. Hopefully Margolis will spur me into being more creative. She's upstairs at the auction.

I found an invite to the auction earlier, so I get my tuxedo back and pass through the security to get upstairs where there's another checkpoint frisking people.

I don't want to lose my wrench, so I carefully knock out a patrolling guard and steal his uniform. I also pick up his pistol, a Bartoli 75-R.

KNIFE. THROAT. DEAD. I STUFF THE BODY IN THE CUPBOARD AND LEAVE





» I head upstairs and find Margolis. Like Novikov, she's being trailed by another bodyguard, and she's constantly surrounded by other people. I spend ages following them around, looking for an opportunity where I can, ahem, wrench her out of existence. Eventually I decide to just try my luck, but as I'm selecting the wrench I notice three words beneath its icon "Non-lethal melee".

Ach! I'd forgotten you can't kill people with blunt weapons in *Hitman*. I consider how to resolve this, concluding the only fair way is to spin the lotto machine again. The number that rolls out is one, which turns out is a Bartoli 75-R.

At least I don't have to go scouting for the new weapon. But this is an unsilenced pistol, so not exactly a subtle weapon.

I follow Margolis around a bit more, thinking things over, when I notice that one of the rooms she goes in – overlooking the fashion stage – only has one other guard in it. I decide to knock out the guard and make my kill there. I'll have to kill the bodyguard as well, but so be it.

Margolis leaves with her shadow, and I quickly deal with the bodyguard, hiding him in yet another cupboard. After a while Margolis returns with her lapdog. I'm about to pop the two of them when something unexpected happens. Margolis walks toward the windows, where I've mistakenly left the security guard's rifle on the floor. "Isn't it your job to look out for these things?" she sneers to her

PLAY IT YOURSELF

Give Hitman Bingo a try

Here's a card for *Hitman's World of Tomorrow* mission. You can pick up a bingo set off Amazon for a tenner. Or just write the weapon names on bits of paper and pull them out of a hat

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Bartoli 75R | 15. Kitchen Knife |
| 2. Bartoli 75S | 16. Letter Opener |
| 3. Bartoli 12.G | 17. Old Axe |
| 4. Tactical Bartoli 12G | 18. Saber |
| 5. Amputation Knife | 19. Screwdriver |
| 6. Battle Axe | 20. Explosive Propane Flask |
| 7. Circumcision Knife | 21. Fire Extinguisher |
| 8. Combat Knife | 22. Remote Explosive |
| 9. Crowbar | 23. ICA19 |
| 10. Fire Axe | 24. Fiber Wire |
| 11. Fire Poker | 25. Sniper Rifle |
| 12. Folding Knife | 26. Falling |
| 13. Hatchet. | 27. Drowning |
| 14. Katana | |

bodyguard. He walks up to the rifle, picks it up, and leaves the room with it. I silently thank the god of murder and raise the pistol. One loud bang later and Margolis is dead. I rush out the door and escape via a nearby window, sliding down the drainpipe and exiting the level via a helicopter at the back of the building.

GETTING MEDIEVAL

Sapienza, Italy. This medieval coastal village is the jewel in *Hitman's* locational crown. I'm here to kill local crime lord Silvio Caruso, as well as a rogue scientist named Francesca De Santis. She's developing a virus for Caruso that I also need to destroy.

After what happened in Paris, I've altered the rules slightly, leaving out the non-lethal weapons on my deadly bingo card. I spin the wheel while 47 reads the local newspaper. The numbers that come out are 15 for De Santis, which is a sabre, and six for Caruso, which is a medieval battle axe. Two of the most conspicuous weapons in the game. This'll be interesting.

I'll worry about the weapons later. First I need a disguise, and a good one – one of Caruso's henchmen to be precise. I know I can get into the mansion via a crumbling tower of Sapienza's medieval wall. There are two henchmen patrolling it, one of whom proves easy to grab for a new disguise.

Suitably threaded, I now need to find the weapons. But Sapienza is a massive level, and I don't have hours to spend scouting every corner. In the end I look up the weapon locations, and I'm glad I did, because both are hidden away. The sabre is located inside the town hall, while the battle axe is embedded into the ceiling of another old tower behind Caruso's mansion.

I grab the sabre first. The town hall is locked up tight, but I shimmy up a drainpipe and enter through a second-floor window. The sabre is above the door, and I have to shoot it down with my silenced pistol. I'm concerned about how I'm going to get the sabre out of the town hall, but it turns out nobody seems to mind a bald gangster wandering around town with a sword.

The obliviousness continues as I stroll through the mansion gate. This piques my curiosity, and I decide to grab the battle axe before moving against either target, which I do without too much fuss. I'm now walking around a heavily guarded crime-lords' mansion with a sword on my back and an axe clutched in my right hand. Nobody bats an eye.

I can only assume the pattern of my Italian shirt makes me invisible to mafiosos. One guard holding a shotgun even waves to me and says, "What up, bro?" as I saunter past him armed like Robert the fucking Bruce.

Killing my targets still isn't going to be easy. Caruso is flanked at all times by three bodyguards, all of whom have the dreaded white circle of suspicion hovering over their heads. Da Santis only has one lackey, but the room she spends most of her time in is absolutely swarming with guards.

I spend ages trying to figure out a way to get them alone. I could follow the mission stories, but the whole point of this exercise is to avoid the trodden path. I walk around for so long I get sloppy, and almost blow my cover





by walking right into Caruso, arousing his suspicion. I run off and hide until the heat cools off.

I'm about to start exploring the mission stories, when suddenly Caruso walks alone into the ground floor lounge. I'm not sure what's happened, but I can only assume that my bumping into him upset the AI's routine, somehow shedding him of his protection. Without hesitating, I cob the battle axe straight at his head. Caruso goes down like, well, like he's been poleaxed. A nearby maid I didn't notice screams. I walk over and punch her in the face, then leg it as guards start to pour in from all sides.

I run up the stairs, somehow undetected, astonished I got away with such spur-of-the-moment madness. There's an unconscious witness to deal with, but I'll do that soon enough. Emboldened by my success, I set my sights on De Santis, gliding straight through the guard hive to the

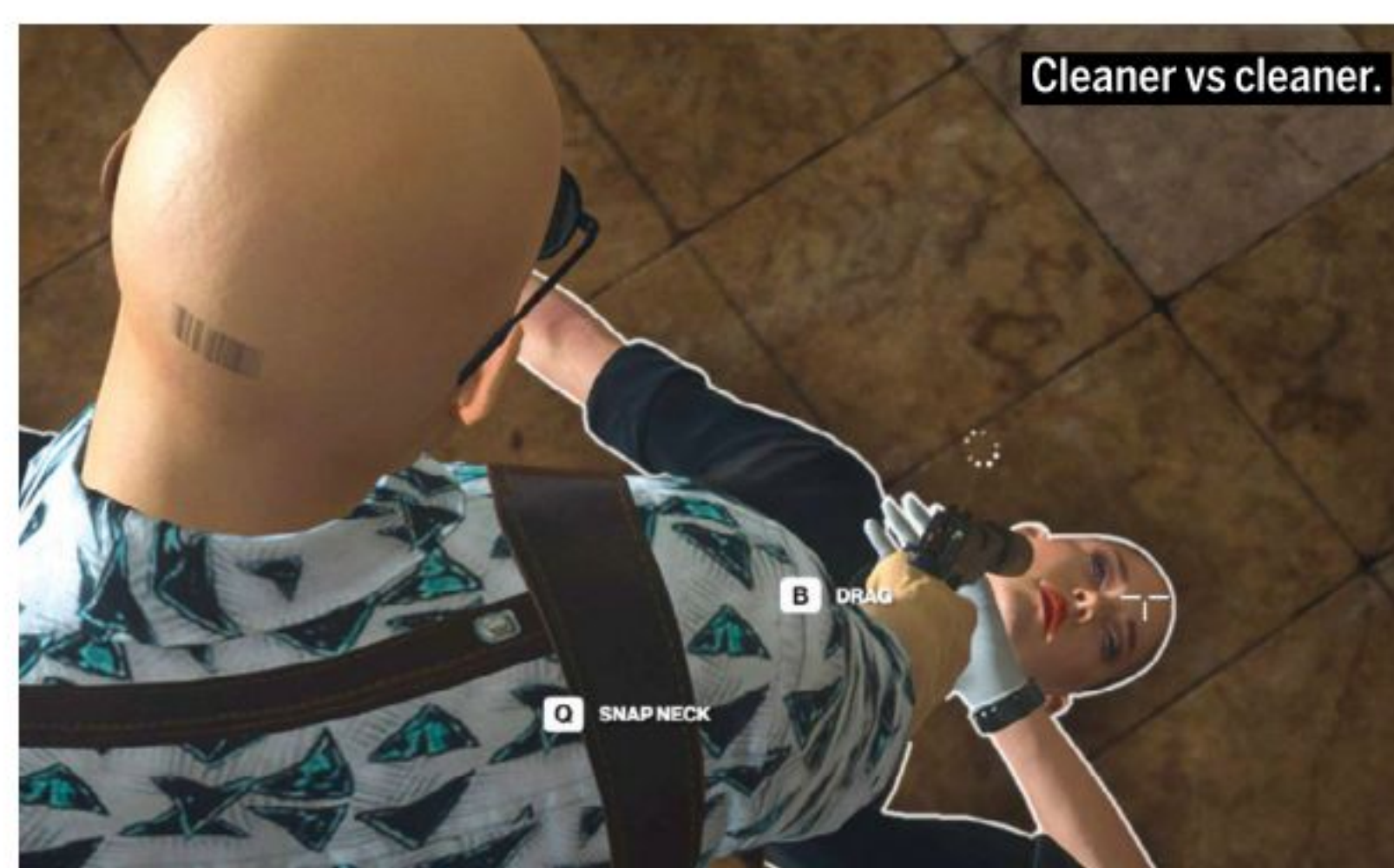
balcony on the far side. Now I notice that De Santis's actual office has no guards in it.

I wait outside on the terrace for her to come around, toss a coin to bring her and her bodyguard out of the room, then slip into the office and stick the sabre through her back. I'm dust before the body is found.

Job done, mostly. I head downstairs, quietly drag the unconscious maid into a nearby bathroom, and put a bullet in her head with my silenced pistol. Then I head down into the laboratory underneath the mansion and deal with the virus. I escape in a flying-boat moored outside the laboratory.

I did it. I took a ludicrous chance with a ludicrous weapon and it paid off. This is the most free I've felt in a sandbox since it was actually filled with sand. There are three targets in my next destination, Marrakesh. It's going to be quite the rollover. ■

WITHOUT HESITATING, I COB THE BATTLE AXE STRAIGHT AT HIS HEAD



This fight will be as tight as his tie.



ENTER THE MATRIX

A flawed attempt to reinvent movie games. *By Jeremy Peel*

Twenty years ago a new science fiction world was born, as relatable as it was outlandish. The Matrix was a rallying cry for anybody whose internet life had become more real to them than their daytime drudge; a freeing fiction that overlaid our own world like a sheet of graph paper and made sense of its unexplained repetitions and irregularities. As much as it was a nightmare or warning, it was also vicarious fantasy – it was pasty Keanu Reeves, asleep at his PC while Massive Attack plays in his headphones, clinging to the side of a building for dear life, eventually bending reality to his will. On some level, everybody watching wanted that call from

Morpheus. To wake up, to know kung fu, to move like they do.

That's what *Enter The Matrix* offered. Its title was a mission statement. Rather than mimic scenes from the movies, you could become a part of their story, interwoven with the green strands of its code.

It was born from a time when Hollywood was crowning a new wave of powerful directors, a younger generation to whom the artistry of videogames was self-evident. Peter Jackson recognised a fellow auteur in Michel Ancel, and tasked the *Beyond Good & Evil* designer with adapting King Kong. Guillermo Del Toro was losing himself in *Ico*, which he declared a masterpiece. And the Wachowskis, suddenly at the head of a multimedia empire, used their position to work with as many of

their favourite artists as they could. They commissioned Neil Gaiman to write a comic; in Tokyo, Madhouse and Studio 4°C produced anime. For the interactive counterpart, they went to the developer behind a goofy sci-fi shooter they'd been fond of in the '90s – MDK.

HOLLYWOOD BOUND

Shiny Entertainment's games had long been distinguished by their imagination – from the squishy, gross-out cast of *Earthworm Jim*, to the hybrid RTS strangeness of *Sacrifice*. A strict no-sequels policy ensured oddball ideas could thrive, making the studio a spiritual precursor to Double Fine. But since the beginning, founder David Perry had his sights set on Hollywood – hence the 'Entertainment' suffix, which he believed would make the company appear more worldly to film production companies.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2003

DEVELOPER
Shiny Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Atari

LINK
<https://amzn.to/311710I>



He got his wish, and then some, with The Wachowskis – who came to game development with a story already written, and heads full of ideas for specific sequences, down to the level design. It sounds stifling for a studio used to flights of fancy, and there's no doubt whose vision *Enter The Matrix* delivers on – as a longtime Shiny Entertainment fan in 2003, I played through the entire game without once clocking the developer behind it.

That tight directorship, however, is the very reason it's a game worth returning to. *Enter The Matrix* formed part of a bold experiment to connect The Matrix's many spin-offs to the movies.

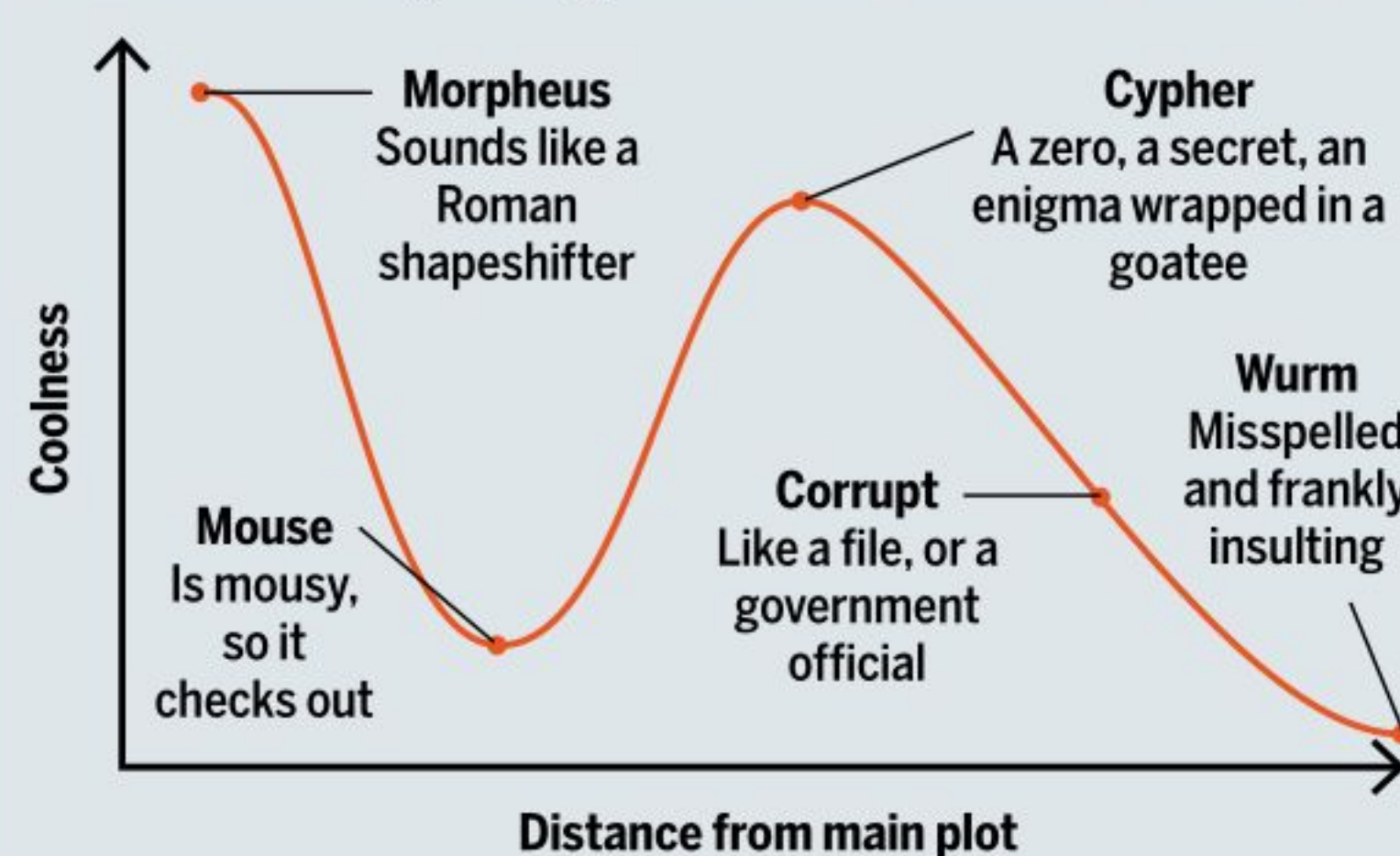
This was not like the expanded universe of *Star Wars* – the mass of licensed novels, cartoons, and games so sprawling and disconnected that Disney felt comfortable dismissing the lot from canon in 2012. Instead, the Wachowskis oversaw an interdependent story that lent each part equal importance.

SWITCH IN PERSPECTIVE

For *The Animatrix*, the Square studio behind *Final Fantasy: The Spirits*

NOT THE ONE

You think anyone gets a cool hacker name?



Within created the *Final Flight of the Osiris* – a photorealistic CG short that followed a doomed hovership crew much like Neo's. Their discovery, of a huge machine army drilling down into Zion, precipitated the events of *The Matrix Reloaded*.

Then, Shiny's game ran parallel to the film, embellishing and expanding on plot points referenced on-screen. And after the conclusion of the trilogy, a Monolith-developed MMO officially took the story forward into

the future – at least until 2009, when *The Matrix Online* was shut down.

The Wachowskis wrote and directed an hour's worth of cutscenes for *Enter The Matrix*, and it's those that still represent its key draw.

For once a game adaptation was not a poor relation to its cinematic inspiration. Instead it was merely a switch in perspective, from the Nebuchadnezzar to another crew caught up within the machinations of Morpheus.

Or at least, that was the idea. The very first level of *Enter The Matrix* reveals a tension in that premise. You're planted in a US post office to pick up a tape containing the last transmission of the Osiris, so that you can hand it over to Zion – literally passing the baton from one medium to another. Yet, before you can leave that post office, the shutters come down and you're pushed into a lobby firefight, pinwheeling out from behind pillars as bullets strip the marble from the walls.

It's a clear echo of the standout action scene from the original film (for which Perry turned down a game deal, not anticipating the phenomenon that would follow).



A typically empty level.



» Enter *The Matrix* was a product of two different urges – one to dive from the rooftop after the established spectacle of the movies, and another to follow its own path. For the most part, it gets away with attempting both, presenting different angles on sequences familiar from the movies.

When Niobe catches Morpheus on the bonnet of her car during the climactic freeway fight of *The Matrix Reloaded*, the moment functions nicely as a surprise twist. Niobe has volunteered her crew to go chasing after Morpheus rather than stay behind to defend Zion, so being there to save his life validates her choice.

Playing the game afterwards, however, fleshes out that arc with powerful effect. As Niobe or Ghost, you drive that car up the freeway, fending off cops and Agents so that you can show up for Morpheus – knowing exactly how important your role will be.

It's an approach that gels nicely with the *Matrix* sequels' less Messianic take on *The One*. If Neo is fated to save mankind, the story goes, it's not a foregone conclusion – it'll only happen with the help and sacrifice of others. As in the Wachowskis' transmedia empire, every part is of equal importance.

TIGHT SCHEDULE

Oddly, there are other times in this shared story where it feels as if cinema-goers have been robbed of spectacle so that *Enter The Matrix* players can enjoy it instead. At one point in *Reloaded*, Morpheus sets up a heist of sorts.

Niobe's crew is tasked with blowing up a power plant to prevent a security system being triggered – but the movie cuts straight to the explosion. It's only *Enter The Matrix* players who wind their way through the plant, shutting off the lights and taking down snipers in the dark. It might be the one time in history that

JACKING IN *Making sense of the complicated Matrix chronology*



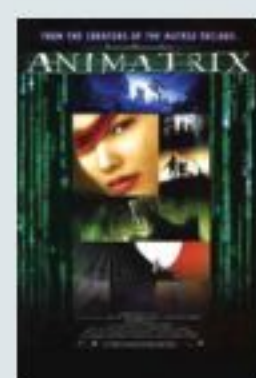
BITS AND PIECES OF INFORMATION

Catalogues the conflict between humans and machines in comic form.



THE MATRIX

In which The One turns from scruffy office drone to spoon-bending superhero.



FINAL FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS

CG short which sets up the sequels' existential threat to mankind.



THE MATRIX RELOADED

Neo battles with rogue programs and his own purpose.



THE MATRIX REVOLUTIONS

The machines reach Zion and battle ensues. As does utter confusion.



THE MATRIX ONLINE

This MMO officially continued the series, but it's dead now.

Anybody still connected to the Matrix is a potential Agent.



IT'S THESE STRUCTURAL QUIRKS THAT ARE STILL WORTH CELEBRATING

a film has been compromised for the benefit of its licensed game, rather than the other way around.

The game commits to this split-perspective story still further by offering an opening choice between Ghost and Niobe as protagonist. While Ghost has a nice sideline in Hume quotes, Niobe's love triangle with Morpheus and Zion's commanding officer makes her the more intriguing choice – not to mention her red faux-crocodile skin trench coat, by some distance the most detailed and mesmerising thing in the game. The pair's shared path diverges at certain points, usually when collaborating on something. As a teenager playing Ghost, I distinctly remember shooting out the front wheel of an aeroplane during takeoff with a sniper rifle. Now, as Niobe, I find myself sprinting through hangars to catch up with the grounded vehicle.



It's these high level, structural quirks that are still worth celebrating in *Enter The Matrix*. The fighting's decent enough, too. You've got a finite amount of bullet time which is topped up by kills – chain enough together and you'll have a constant trickle of slo-mo throughout the fight. Ammo is scarce, pushing you to swap often between shotguns, uzis, and a basic take on martial arts. In short, it keeps you moving, just as Neo and Trinity did in that lobby.

What's more, Shiny smartly committed to contextual moves long before that became the industry standard for action games. A sidestep towards a wall while in bullet time becomes a cartwheel, during which you can empty half your clip or switch to another weapon. At its best, it's smooth and instinctive.

That said, it can be tempting to forgive old games too much in lieu of putting them in their proper context. You know what else came out in 2003? *Max Payne 2*. Remedy had outmanoeuvred the Wachowskis, making their aesthetic interactive years before it was officially licensed. Shiny, meanwhile, never quite left the '90s – too

often designing levels as roomy, blocky interiors rather than the spatial combat puzzles the third-person action genre was perfecting.

The developer clearly suffered, too, from the hard limits of their project. While the Wachowskis threw money and support at *Enter The Matrix*, it still had to come out when *The Matrix Reloaded* did, imposing a tight two-year development schedule that left the game janky. It was a depressingly familiar problem for a project that had otherwise broken free from the low expectations of licensed movie games.

Afterwards, Shiny worked on *The Matrix: Path of Neo*. Though built on the same combat, it was the opposite of *Enter The Matrix* – a greatest hits compilation that pulled all of the most famous scenes from the films. The Wachowskis had capitulated to fans who simply wanted to waggle a controller while the movies played out once more before their eyes. By contrast, *Enter The Matrix* stands as a flawed monument to ambition, and perhaps even a model for developers and directors to follow and improve upon in the golden age of the cinematic universe. ■



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

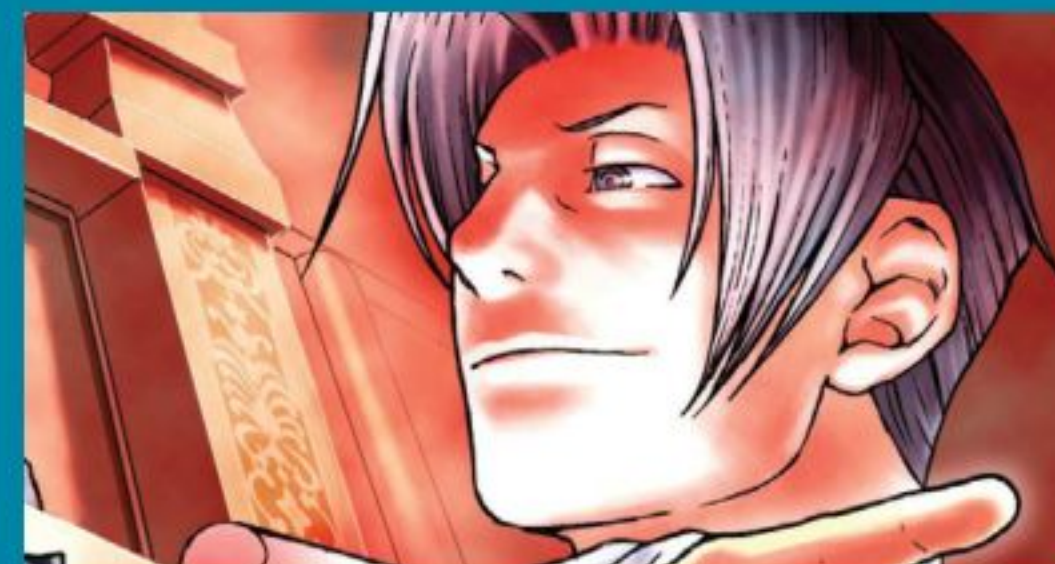
MILES EDGEWORTH IN ACE ATTORNEY

Everyone's
favourite grump.

By Malindy Hetfeld



RIGHT: At first Miles is depicted as an intimidating foe who'll do anything to get a conviction.



Not a whole lot of game franchises offer character development that bridges several instalments. It's easy to see why – you don't want to make it too hard for people joining a franchise late to get up to speed with what happened to its heroes. Sometimes however, you get a chance to start at the beginning, especially now, thanks to all these re-releases.

That's how I met Miles Edgeworth. Miles is *Ace Attorney*'s not-so-secret star, because his relationship with protagonist Phoenix Wright supplies much of the game's narrative backbone. Due to it giving you different cases to solve, I expected *Ace Attorney* to be a collection of comedic, but ultimately unrelated one-shots. But Miles quickly establishes himself as your ongoing antagonist, and he makes a great anime foil – a fop with the most dramatic fashion sense, a permanent scowl and no time for nonsense.

His alarming reputation succeeds him. Miles, they whisper in the hallways, doesn't care about justice, he only cares about upholding his conviction record. What a revelation then, an unexpected delight, that this grumpy fellow cares about justice very much indeed. Behind his stoic shell hides one of the most dramatic backstories I've had the pleasure of discovering in a long time.

RISE AND FALL

Miles Edgeworth's story is so good to me because it takes the bully who otherwise might have become a villain and offers him redemption. Miles and Phoenix go way back. They became childhood friends after Miles stood up for Phoenix in a dramatic classroom trial, inspiring

LOVE TO HATE YOU *These characters are big softies deep down*



SQUALL LEONHART
FINAL FANTASY VIII
Whatever.



CASSANDRA PENTAGHAST
DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION
Romance novels bring out her softer side.



BEN THROTTLE
FULL THROTTLE
A scruffy but loyal friend.



GLADOS
PORTAL 2
She just really needed someone to talk to.

the latter to take up a career as a defence attorney. But their paths diverged, chiefly due to the trauma Edgeworth experienced when his father died – trauma that would fuel his relentless chase of criminals later on. Without giving too much away, the backstory is still almost hilariously overwrought, but all in all we can understand Miles' motive. He became vulnerable and was basically led astray into the role of Phoenix's adversary. Only when he becomes a suspect himself and has to deal with the feelings of helplessness he inflicted onto others does Edgeworth understand what he's done.

Edgeworth admits this to himself, which leads him to help Phoenix out more than once and even grudgingly accept help. It's so enjoyable to watch, particularly because he doesn't ever unthaw. Miles doesn't become nice or, God forbid, soft. At first, this makes Edgeworth more akin to a running gag, the fop who gets flustered by the shenanigans around him. But every once in a while his shell cracks and something endearing slips out – like how he's a massive fan of *Ace Attorney*'s in-game TV show *Steel Samurai*.

While part of Edgeworth's slow transformation comes from the fact that he can't seem to beat Wright in court, he is only able to truly move on when he finds closure regarding his father's death. What a simple yet powerful message – before you can show justice to other people, you have to experience justice yourself.

LIVE AND LEARN

Miles Edgeworth characterises how we're all looking to do the right thing but sometimes get waylaid through no fault of our own. Miles wanted a new father figure and thus modelled himself completely after his mentor Manfred von Karma. His story shows that when we're looking for our place in the world, we may end up following someone because it's the easier thing to do, but playacting someone else won't sustain us.

In Phoenix, Miles Edgeworth recognises the person he could have

HE'S A MASSIVE FAN OF ACE ATTORNEY'S IN-GAME TV SHOW STEEL SAMURAI



been, and across several games he mulls that over. But that's another attempt at being someone else.

Over the course of the *Ace Attorney* games you hear from Miles less and less as the series introduces you to new protagonists. He comes to an agreement with Phoenix that ensures both sides focus on finding the truth, rather than trying to one-up each other. Official art depicts Edgeworth as part of the large, happy courtroom family, where he joins picnics and beach trips.

Eventually he finds his own thing, and it's reassuring that sometimes it takes even videogame characters years to settle into themselves. ■

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www.ace-attorney.com



RIGHT: A scene from Miles' childhood. I wasn't joking when I said he'd been through hard times.



SAMUEL ROBERTS



I can never truly die, because I am an idea. You can't kill an idea. Oh, hang on, my Futurenet email has been deleted. RIP.



STELLARIS

www.paradoxplaza.com/stellaris

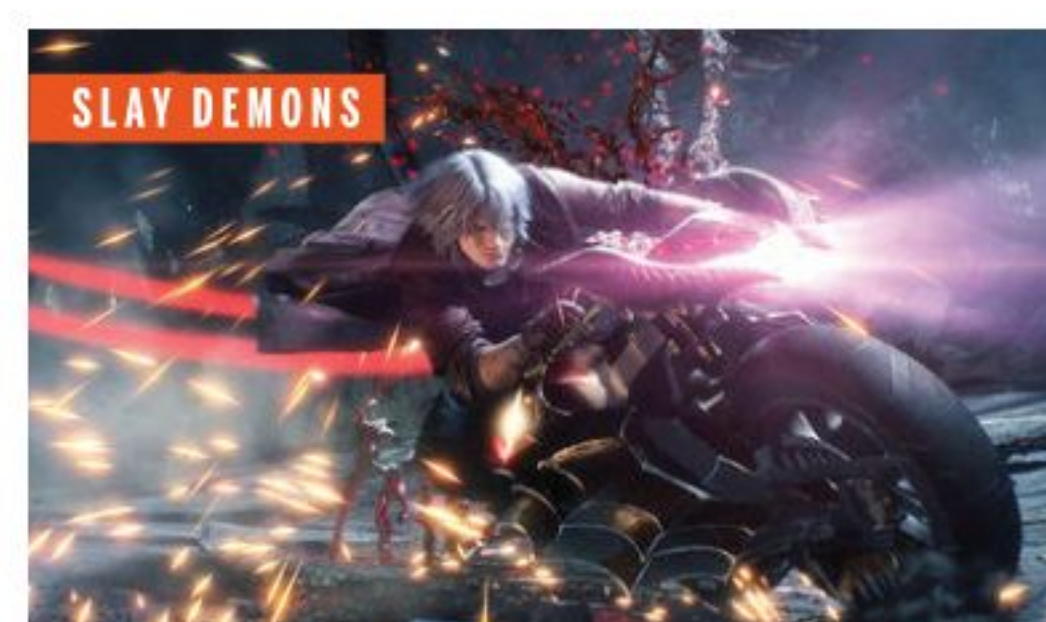
→ Consider this Must Play an earnest list of the games I now plan to play as I exit PC Gamer. I've never played Paradox's sci-fi strategy *Stellaris*, but I have bought four DLC packs for it, assuming that decision would someday pay off. Truthfully, I feel like I'm going to play two hours of this then switch *Sekiro* back on.



HITMAN 2

www.hitman.com

→ After a rewarding 60-hour jaunt through both *Hitmans* (*Hitmen*?) at the beginning of this year, the New York bank level is tempting me back. Now I'm leaving games media, it's time to master this location, even if former PCG staffer Tom Francis has already spent a day ruining the leaderboard for the rest of us.



DEVIL MAY CRY 5

www.devilmaycry5.com

→ I've spent three hours with *Devil May Cry 5* and it was exactly like the old games but with more ways to play, which is a smart way to iterate on a niche action game. Still, *Sekiro* stole its thunder and my time, which is reflected in its placement on our Top 100 list. Still, I'll happily make time for Dante again.



SEA OF THIEVES

www.seaofthieves.com

→ There's now plenty to do in *Sea of Thieves*, even if most of it is still a process of figuring out an island, finding a thing on that island, fighting some skeletons, and sailing back again. The new story stuff has some neat twists on these fundamentals, though, and as I write this, we're three perfectly OK chapters into it.



DRAGON QUEST XI: ECHOES OF AN ELUSIVE AGE

www.dragonquest.square-enix-games.com/xi

→ I bought this last year on PC, installed it, then never played it. Now I'm going into semi-retirement (ha! I wish), I might give it a go. Annoyingly, though, there's a Nintendo Switch version coming out with extra stuff, and if I'm being honest I'll probably just play that, pissing £30 away.



SHENMUE I AND II

shenmue.sega.com

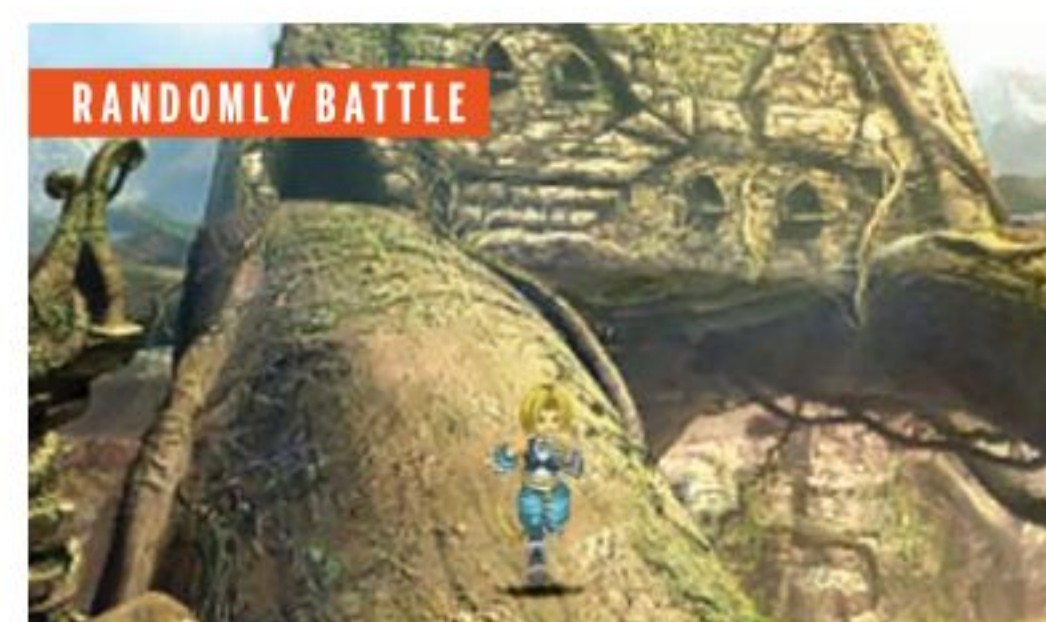
→ I now get to enjoy *Shenmue 3* coverage in PC Gamer as a reader. When Andy Kelly inevitably gives the new entry 82 per cent, while every other outlet on this planet hands out a baffled 5/10, I'll enjoy the fireworks. I've finished *Shenmue II*, but never played the first, so I'll rectify that in the next period of my life.



TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

www.totalwar.com/games/warhammer

→ I never truly got into a *Total War* game in the time I ran PC Gamer, despite running what seemed like dozens of covers on the series in all its many forms. But I respect its importance to that vital pillar of the PC Gamer UK print audience – dads. Maybe it's time to accept my fate and get very into grand strategy.



FINAL FANTASY IX

www.finalfantasy.com

→ The *Final Fantasy* I never properly played. I always thought I was saving it for a rainy day: a golden age RPG from a series I love, totally untouched and ready to be explored and enjoyed. Chances are, I'll play the first two hours, get distracted, go back, start again, and repeat this cycle until my dying day.

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TACTICAL BUMBAG

You can store sandwiches in here for mid-mission sustenance. The most tactical sandwich? It's cheese and pickle.

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TACTICAL HEADPHONES

For listening to your 'BADASS' playlist on Spotify, featuring Kid Rock, Limp Bizkit, Disturbed, and Smash Mouth.

TACTICAL BACKWARDS BASEBALL CAP

If you lose your tactical shades you can swivel this bad boy around to keep the sun out of your eyes.

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